



40c

Susie is a Jane-of-all-trades in a small radio station.

Here's Susie

**VIRGINIA C.
HOLMGREN**



Terri Rebo

Here's Susie

VIRGINIA C. HOLMGREN



AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 22

HERE'S SUSIE

An AIRMONT BOOK published by arrangement with
Thomas Bouregy and Company, Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY

Bouregy edition published February, 1961
Airmont edition published January, 1964

©, Copyright, 1961, by Virginia C. Holmgren

All rights reserved.

PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY IN THE DOMINION OF CANADA
BY THE RYERSON PRESS, TORONTO

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE COLONIAL PRESS INC., CLINTON, MASSACHUSETTS

AIRMONT PUBLISHING Co., Inc., 22 East 60th St., New York 22, N.Y.

Here's Susie . . .

with a pleasant recollection of two
busy years on the staff of another
radio 1330 whose friendly personnel
bear no intentional resemblance to
the characters in this book . . .
and a special salute to the hip
vocabulary of David Hauser.

Chapter 1

A GUST of March wind came blowing into the train along with the conductor's final call. "Middleton! Middleton Union Station."

Susie Gryphon was already in the aisle, hatbox and train case in hand. Now, still playing it for laughs, she turned to give the two younger girls in the seat beside her a prima donna exit line.

"Farewell!" she intoned dramatically, and her blue eyes, accented by pointed blue-rimmed glasses, rolled them a fluttery glance. "We'll never meet again."

The two high-school girls giggled, as she had known they would. They had been so wide-eyed at having an older girl sit beside them exchanging confidences all the way from Chicago that their spring vacation trip was obviously off to a bubbling start. Susie had done her utmost to give them a good show, magnifying her Girl Friday role at the small Chicago printshop to exciting advertising career status, dramatizing even the tamest episodes from her two years at Western University so hilariously that they had shrieked and giggled and begged for more. Susie had obliged. After all, anything was better than enduring this train ride alone. Anything was better than sitting mile after mile with nothing to think of but how horrible Middleton would probably be. A small city like Middleton would have to be horrible after living all one's life in Chicago.

Susie steadied herself against the jolting stop and reached for a ray of hope. At least she hadn't left her heart behind. She hadn't dated anyone seriously for months. As her mother had said, Mr. Wonderful could come along in Middleton as easily as in Chicago, couldn't he?

She tossed back her straggling, shoulder-long blond locks. "Here goes," she added with flippant bravado. "Susan Elaine Gryphon meets the Great Unknown!"

It was her last act of clowning, and Susie knew it. When she stepped down off the train to meet her father's all-seeing eyes, she'd have to play it straight. She'd have to be even more careful with her mother. Both of them were experts at hearing what you thought instead of what you said. She couldn't fool them for long with all this joking about Middleton the Great Unknown, although she had been trying ever since that first moment when her father had told her that from now on Middleton was going to be home.

Home! Susie felt the same sick feeling that had gripped her at that announcement. One minute home had been where it had always been—in an old brick house on a quiet Northside Chicago street—and the next it was out in Middleton, a town she had never heard of before her father told her he'd bought a partnership in an electric appliance shop there. It didn't seem such a topsy-turvy move for him. The new shop would handle the same Epco brand of appliances he'd been selling for years, though before he'd been out on the road, contacting dealers. For Susie's mother the move turned everything right side up at last. Dad would be home every night, instead of traveling three weeks out of four—a necessity now that she was a housebound semi-invalid with a long stretch of recuperation ahead.

"And she needs *me*, too," Susie reminded herself. She had resolved not to complain, but everything had happened so fast, it wasn't easy for her to adjust. The peo-

ple who had bought the Chicago house wanted to move in at once, and, as usual, Aunt Ri had come swooping down to take charge with her old-maid schoolteacher bossiness, taking Mrs. Gryphon back home with her while Susie was sent to temporary quarters at a girls' club and her father was hustled off to Middleton to finish remodeling the house so that it would be what Aunt Ri labeled "halfway decent." It was an old house, right around the corner from the shop, and Susie's father had mysterious plans for connecting the two. Even her mother hadn't given Susie much of a description, although she had moved to Middleton a week ago and written Susie to come the minute the printshop found someone to replace her. Susie's lips tightened. Well, here she was, and it was going to be far from easy to find a job in a town like this, where she knew no one.

"Good-by again," one of the girls called. "Good luck with Pete the Built-in Boy Friend."

From the doorway Susie flipped the girls a wave of complete assurance, but inwardly she was shakier than half-set jello. Just because Pete Ansel, Dad's new partner, was a young bachelor with an apartment of his own in the remodeled building didn't mean he would be in any rush to take over as the "Built-in Boy Friend" that Mom had titled him in her letter. "A nice young man," she had written. "Pretty smart of your father to buy a place with a built-in boy friend, don't you think?"

Perhaps it was smart—provided they didn't ruin everything by letting Pete know that's what they called him. Men always turned skittish when mammas got that wedding-bell gleam. Both her father and her mother seemed to think that any man who looked twice had marriage in mind. Susie let the corner of a smile break the frown on her face. She had marriage in mind, herself. But she wanted a chance at a good job, too. Then the smile vanished. The girls in Chicago had been blunt in their warn-

ings that a place like Middleton held small chance of finding a man *or* a job.

Susie found her bags among the array of luggage on the platform and then looked around. But about all she could see was a tall, thickly grown cedar hedge separating the tracks from the street beyond, for the long train had deposited her well down from the station. There was no sign of her father. She gripped her hatbox and train case and started forward, eyes searching ahead for the familiar figure. Suddenly she stopped, blond locks swaying from side to side in utter disbelief. That dingy mud-colored building up ahead couldn't be Union Station! She knew Middleton wasn't a big city, but surely it was big enough to afford a station better than that!

Just then the cars beside her started to roll, and Susie turned hastily, searching for the two schoolgirls as if their faces at the window would be the last friendly ones she'd ever see. "Lost your last friend," the quickening wheels seemed to rumble. "Last friend, last friend."

"Susie!" came a familiar hail behind her, and Susie whirled to see her father hurrying down the platform, his big-featured, craggy face alight, brown eyes behind his thick spectacles shining in welcome.

"Daddy!" She dropped hatbox and train case and rushed forward to fling her arms around him in a five-feet-two tiptoe hug. Her fears vanished. Middleton couldn't be as bad as the train station threatened or her father would not have come here. He was too smart a businessman to strand himself in a backwater burg. After all, he'd traveled for Epco all over three states, and he knew a good business town from a poor one.

"Baggage checks?" Mr. Gryphon asked.

Susie handed them over and, with another jolting glance at the station, remembered that her father hadn't chosen Middleton because of its business record but because with the store-with-nearby-house arrangement he'd be within call whenever her mother needed him.

Not out on the road as he'd been when she was rushed to the hospital for that emergency operation. Not out on the road as he'd been five years ago when Susie's brother Bob was killed by a hit-and-run driver. There wasn't going to be a third crisis for Mom to face alone, Dad had promised. And so Middleton was now home.

"How's Mom?" Susie asked. The last piece of luggage had been wedged into the trunk compartment, and they were both climbing into the front seat.

Her father's balding head gave a familiar bob of satisfaction as he sent the car forward. "Better. Much better, honey. She has to take it easy for a while yet, but she'll be fine."

His voice had a tightness to it, and Susie reached over to let a touch tell him she knew how much it meant. No wonder she was "marriage-minded" when she saw what happy companionship marriage had brought her parents.

"Like your new home town?" Dad asked gruffly.

Susie had been expecting that question, and she had an answer ready. "At the rate you're going, all I can say is, it's a nice town, *wasn't* it? Aren't we out of the business district already?"

Dad nodded. "Sure. You didn't think I'd make you live right downtown, did you? We're out in a sort of residential business center that pulls in trade from all the farms between here and Waverly. Fruit farming's big business in this country. We'll get our share of customers."

He gave another bobbing nod, pointing ahead. "Look for the big sign that says 'Casa Electrica.' That's us. The House of Electricity. We're going Spanish in a big way. *Si, si, senorita*. See that big square white building on your right?"

Susie followed her father's pointing gesture, unaware how plainly the careful tilt of her blond head declared that she was not going to let him see disappointment even if the remodeled building looked like a ramshackle

hodgepodge. But how could it be anything else? A shop and a house around the corner joined in what must be an L-shaped monstrosity, with Pete Ansel's bachelor apartment over the store and his repair shop somewhere alongside. Pete was to handle repairs and installations while her father took care of sales.

Pete Ansel. Susie felt a gulp of excitement clog her throat—and hoped her parents hadn't scared him with that Built-in Boy-Friend label. It might sound like a joke to them, but to a wary bachelor it would be a ball-and-chain threat.

"There 'tis—on the far corner," Mr. Gryphon said. "How do you like it? My little face-lifting job came out pretty good, if I do say so myself."

Susie saw the sign first with the familiar Epco elf trademark in a zigzag caper. Then she found herself almost stuttering in surprise. Casa Electrica looked more than "pretty good." The face-lifting was a gleaming white stucco uniting house and shop from corner to corner, sidewalk to pink tiled roof. To accent the Spanish theme there were arched entrances at the shop front and on the side street. Graceful wrought-iron balconies bracketed the display windows that gave Susie a brief glimpse of pastel and chrome as the car swung around the corner and headed for the archway. Her surveying glance flicked over two huge pottery jars on either side of the doorway and then caught on a sudden ducking movement of a tall, broad-shouldered figure in the window. Pete Ansell

She knew it was Pete. The car whisked through the archway and with a sharp turn nosed to a halt in a narrow carport. Now she saw that the made-over building was not L-shaped, but a hollow square, white-walled inside as well as out, with a terra-cotta brick patio to match the tiles on the overhanging roof. A very small patio, but set off by more huge pottery jars and a border

of green shrubbery about the walls. Against the stucco's gleaming whiteness the peacock blue doors and window sills made a striking accent, and Susie gave her father admiring approval.

He nodded at the blue door on the right. "That's ours. Pete's apartment is over the shop."

Susie turned to follow his second gesture to the left, and through the shop door she caught another glimpse of that peering, broad-shouldered shadow. Dad saw it, too, and tossed a salute in the shadow's direction. "Be with you in a minute, Pete."

At his words the figure ducked out of sight with the guilty jerk of an eavesdropper, and Susie felt a prickle of hopeful excitement tingle along her arms. At least Pete was interested enough to want to see what she looked like. Now the question was, Did he like what he saw? Many males wouldn't look twice at a girl who wore glasses, even when they were pixie-framed in French blue that matched her eyes, and—

Susie jerked to with guiltiness of her own. Her mother would be listening, waiting, not yet strong enough to run to the door for a homecoming welcome as she had always done in Chicago. Many things weren't going to be like Chicago. Susie wiped the thought from her mind and hurried toward the peacock blue door while her father began unloading the car.

"Hoo-hoo, where are you?" she called out in the old singsong rhyme she had used since childhood.

There was no need to call again, for the blue door opened into the living room, and there was Susie's mother on the couch, her eyes blue and eager as her daughter's own.

"Mom!" Susie was on her knees, cradling the frail body in a welcoming hug.

Mr. Gryphon came right behind her, huffing and puffing in a mock stagger beneath a load of suitcases. "It's

about time you came home, Susie. With all this Spanish stuff around, I can't make that kitchen stove cook anything but canned chili and beans."

Two sets of blue eyes exchanged a woman-to-woman glance of indulgence, and Susie laughed outright.

"Well," her mother said, "that's an improvement, anyway. When we were first married, you couldn't cook anything but beans."

"Don't malign me, woman," Mr. Gryphon came back in a teasing growl. "I can cook anything that comes out of a can or the freezer, and always could." He grinned, looking from one upturned face to the other, and then gave a thumb jerk toward the stairway. "Help me carry up this stuff of yours, Susie. You can give your unpacking a lick and a promise and then get supper. Pete's invited. I promised him chocolate cake if he'd come meet you."

"Chocolate cake!" Susie exclaimed, a dismayed glance at her watch causing her to miss the teasing wink. "There isn't time to bake a cake now."

"Cake's all made," Dad countered airily. "Middleton has bakeries, supermarkets, just like Chicago, even if you don't think this is much of a burg."

Susie avoided denial and reached for a suitcase. Dad and his little jokes! Had he really had to bribe Pete to meet her? Or was he teasing? She could at least check on the cake.

A quick look in the kitchen told her the cake was a reality. It stood on the shelf in the corner, and just beyond it was the telephone and a promisingly plump directory. If Middleton had a phone directory that big, there must be more chances for jobs than the dinky station indicated, she decided hopefully, and followed her father up the stairs to a corner room.

"Letter from Aunt Ri today," he told her quietly fishing a folded envelope out of a back pocket. He gave it to her. "Didn't let your mother read it. She'd only get upset. Ri thinks I've got us all in a goat's nest." He

scratched his balding head. "That sister of mine can be pretty outspoken sometimes."

Susie's lips twitched in grim acknowledgment. In her experience Aunt Ri was outspoken all the time.

"Guess she has a right to speak up," Mr. Gryphon admitted. "I had to borrow money from her to swing this deal. Your mother knows that, of course, but no use rubbing it in. So I guess Pete and I have to call Maria a silent partner."

"Silent!" Susie couldn't help exclaiming, giving the fat letter a meaningful flip. Aunt Maria Gryphon was about the most unsilent person she knew, and what her sharp tongue didn't say, her snapping black eyes did. Nobody else could give a black look like Aunt Ri.

"Well," Mr. Gryphon explained, "she promised not to come back here and give any more advice in person, at any rate. I put my foot down on that after the last time. She and Pete had a regular go-round. Whew!"

Susie added another dimension to her imaginary portrait of her father's partner. If he could face down Aunt Maria—

"Look like home?" her father asked with a hopeful tone.

Susie's blue eyes followed his sweeping glance around the room. Her favorite white hobnail spread on the bed, reading lamp nearby, the same flowered drapes from her old room in Chicago hanging at the new windows as if they had been made for them. Except for blue walls instead of the familiar pink, and dark woodwork instead of white, the new room was hearteningly like the old.

"Of course," Susie answered, opening the closet door as an excuse for averting her face. "Look like" didn't make it home.

"Well, gotta go back to the shop," her father said. He went down the stairs whistling, but Susie caught an unfamiliar quaver in his voice and gave the letter from Aunt Ri a baleful glance. Even without reading it she

could well imagine the crusty phrasing. Unconsciously her face soured into Aunt Maria's schoolteacher frown, and her pursed lips formed for a mimic copy of the stern, bugle-toned voice: "Remember you bear the Gryphon name! Remember the lion and the eagle!"

Mimicking Aunt Ri had got Susie into trouble more than once in childhood days, but at the college dorm, and even at the office, it had been good for many laughs. Susie smiled, remembering the chuckles whenever she swished her long blond hair into a tight old maid's bun and pulled her glasses down on her nose as a signal that she was going into character for some typical Aunt Ri-ism. Everyone's favorite was the story of the Gryphon name. According to legend, a gryphon was an all-powerful beast, a lion with an eagle's head and wings, that defended its nest of gold against all enemies. It was Aunt Ri's proud boast that the family had this legendary power and courage, as well as the name, but Susie's father always said the only heritage he could claim was the big beaklike Gryphon nose.

Susie, catching a mirrored reflection of her own small features and blue eyes, was glad she took after her mother. Her brother Bob had been all Gryphon—big nose and brown eyes—just like her father. But even her ungryphon-like looks had not spared Susie from Aunt Ri's exhortations. Even when she was just a child any tears or timidity brought a trumpeting admonition: "You're a Gryphon. A lion with wings of an eagle. Stop acting half-sparrow, half-dormouse!"

The analogy no longer hurt. Susie could laugh at Aunt Ri now, the way she faced any trouble. "If you can't lick it, laugh at it," her father had taught her.

Susie shoved the last suitcase under the bed and hurried downstairs.

"What's on the menu besides cake?" she called out to her mother from the kitchen door. "Want tea or coffee? And how about Pete?"

"Pete's nice," her mother said, and twinkled at Susie's answering look of exasperation. "Nice and single."

"I mean," Susie said, her own twinkle struggling to conquer defeated dignity, "I mean, does Pete take tea or coffee. As you very well know."

"Coffee," Mrs. Gryphon said. "And the menu's Hamburger Hurry-Up. Meat's in the refrigerator, and there's a can of mixed vegetables on the shelf. Onions in the cupboard beneath the sink."

"Just like home," Susie came back, hoping it sounded sincere. Somewhat belatedly she had realized that perhaps it was her own unhappy face, and not Aunt Ri's letter, that had put that quaver in her father's whistle. Middleton wasn't just like home—right now it didn't feel as if it ever would be. But what couldn't be cured might just as well be endured with a cheerful face.

Pete also looked like her father, Susie realized with a start as she glanced up to catch the two in profile against the light from the opening door. She whisked off her apron and gave a straightening tug at her straggling hair as she went to answer her father's booming summons.

Pete was taller than her father, she saw now, but he had the same prominent, bony nose that gave the craggy look to her father's profile, the same high forehead and oval face. Then Pete stepped into the full lamplight and the likeness vanished, denied completely by the thick shock of pale hair with a cowlick and the wide Dutch blue eyes that matched his vee-necked sweater.

"Hi," Susie said, holding out her hand with a smile she hoped looked friendly but not too eager.

"Hi," Pete said, giving an approving survey of her petite five-feet-two figure. "Thanks for letting me come to dinner right off the bat like this. But a guy can stand his own bachelor slumgullion just so long. Guess you know I'm hoping you'll ask me pretty often."

"Well, I know the old saying," Susie began brightly.

And stopped short. Perhaps the way to a man's heart *was* through his stomach, but it would be a blunder to say so now. "I know those who eat must work," she substituted. "Come on. I know where there's an apron just your size."

Pete ambled after her good-naturedly, but at the kitchen door he turned back to his partner with one blond eyebrow up in a quizzical arch.

"Man, like you didn't tell me this chick would make with the apron jazz," was his grumbling protest. "How come you didn't clue me in?"

Tom Gryphon chuckled. "Every man for himself, boy. If she's bossing you instead of me, I can read the paper in peace for once."

"You sure did speak," Pete acknowledged, but the growl was swallowed in a grin, and Susie knew there was already a strong friendship between the two.

In the kitchen Pete waved the offered apron aside and flipped on the small radio, twisting the dial with a brief touch of pre-acquaintance to get the station he wanted.

"That beatnik jive gets your dad every time," he said. "I make with it now and then just to tease him."

Susie started to answer, but Pete held up a hand for silence. "Listen, girl. Sports news. TKO."

"TKO?" Susie said, reaching for the spice rack. She began seasoning the meat with a shake of this, a pinch of that, and looked up to catch Pete openmouthed.

"Don't you even measure that stuff?" he demanded.

Susie flipped him a born-chef's look of amused condescension. "My eye's as good as a measuring spoon any day. So's my nose."

She sniffed the savory odor judiciously, added another pinch of oregano, and then went back to her question. "What were you saying about TKO? If you're trying to find out if I know my sports, try again. 'TKO' means technical knockout, and this guy is talking about baseball, not prize fights."

Pete chuckled. "You may know your sports talk, but you're not hip on your old college heroes. I know you went to Western U a couple of years, and Terence Kensington Oliphant was about the biggest football star Western ever had."

"Oh, Ollie Oop!" Susie said. "He was long before my day."

Pete nodded. "Ollie Oop to *you*. When he was the big hero of Middleton High, we called him TKO. A knock-out with all the dames, you know."

Susie gave him a look, and Pete went on. "He was a junior when I was a lowly freshie, and I followed him around like the tail on a comet. Nearly bust my buttons the day I got to play on the same baseball team with him, and when he asked me to be a Hamster--wow!"

"Hamster?" Susie said, remembering the pictures of the furry ratlike beasties that had decorated the kindergarten room years ago.

"Radio ham club. Amateur radio operators, if you want to talk from Squaresville. TKO was founder and honorary president. He's sportscaster down at KMID now, and he's good. Listen."

Susie listened, or half listened, her mind more on the meat simmering in the old black iron pot. Meat plus onions plus seasonings, all browned and thickened for gravy—she checked through the familiar recipe. Add a can of mixed vegetables at the last moment, and there was the old Gryphon standby, Hamburger Hurry-Up. Susie's father had christened it that years ago because Mrs. Gryphon always served it when they wanted to hurry through dinner. It was by no means a company meal, but Pete had evidently made it plain that he didn't want to be considered company in the Gryphon household. Every time TKO switched to a commercial, Pete would duck into the living room to relay the news to Mr. Gryphon, who was suffering through a very fuzzy television report. Fuzzy was the only kind of reception

you got in Middleton, Pete explained. The surrounding hills deflected the beam. Most people still relied on radio.

Susie tried to think of something to hold up her end of the conversation, to reclaim Pete's interest. Something about Ollie Oop would be the thing. "Isn't he—TKO—with the Packers?" she said.

Pete turned, obviously pleased. "He used to be. But he has that trick knee, and it put him on the bench once too often. When they let him go, he came home, and Dan Tucker got him on at KMID."

"Dan Tucker?" Susie said, wondering if that was another name she should recognize.

"Another old Hamster. He does the Magic Melody Man show every afternoon—your mother listens. Nice guy, Dan, but he'll never get anywhere. Too satisfied with what he's doing. Now, TKO's got ambition."

Susie was too busy for comment, and Pete rambled on. Something about rivalry between Middleton and Waverly, the next town over the hills. Waverly wanted to put a booster tower on the hill to catch Middleton in its television audience, but Middleton wanted a channel of its own. Even without that cause for quarreling, there was high-school sports rivalry of long and bitter standing.

Susie was tasting and testing. A dash more garlic salt, a dribble more of savory sauce. She looked over the spice rack.

"Here," Pete said solemnly, handing her an unopened box. "You haven't tried any of this."

Susie looked at the label, then up at Pete. "Caraway seeds? In hamburger? I've mixed it with cottage cheese for a dip, but—" Then she saw his grin. "You!" She gave him a flicking finger. "Make yourself useful for a change and fix the toast. I'll be ready to serve in a jiffy."

She reached for the radio dial, hoping to find some good music.

"Uh-oh, don't touch," Pete protested. "I thought TKO was a friend of yours."

"No friend of mine when he gives sports talk at meal time. The Gryphons like music on the menu."

"You'll get music," Pete promised, switching the dial back. "I know the KMID log to the minute. You'll have music now for exactly—"

He wangled his wrist watch out from under the blue sweater sleeve and gave it an exaggerated scanning. "For exactly twenty-five minutes and thirty seconds," he said as a wailing trumpet came in on the downbeat. "Minus time out for a few commercials, of course. And if you object to commercials, with or without your meals, you're no salesman's daughter."

Susie capitulated. "No objection to commercials. Some of them are good. Remember that jingle about—"

An interrupting bellow from the living room made them both jump.

"When do we eat?" Mr. Gryphon's voice boomed in mock ferocity.

"Right now," Susie sang out. "Come and get it."

She whisked the plates to the table, and her mother with Mr. Gryphon's arm to steady her, made a careful but smiling entrance.

The meal must have tasted good, Susie decided. Pete polished off a liberal second helping and then sprawled back with a contented smile. "M-m! With my eyes wide open I'm dreaming."

"With your eyes—what?" Susie teased him. There wasn't a wink of Dutch blue showing beneath those blissfully drooping lids.

Pete sprang up the moment Susie began clearing the table and shooed the elder Gryphons back into the living room.

"Bring on your dish towel, Susie Q," he ordered. "I wash, you wipe."

When the dishes were finally done, Susie reached over to turn off the radio.

"KMID's got a pretty good woman's show," Pete suggested. "Anyhow, they've got a pretty good-looking gal dishing out the chatter. A redhead. Cookie Carson. TK introduced me one day when I was down there hacking around." He wolf-whistled and gave a gesture descriptive of curves.

"Hm," Susie said, trying not to sound too curious. "Must be she has you hooked."

"Not me," Pete denied promptly. "Dan Tucker's her meat. I'm free, frank, and single, and I mean to stay that way. Can't you gals think of anything but tying a man to your string?"

"What makes you think we don't?" Susie countered.

"I've got a sister," Pete explained. "She got her man before she was old enough to vote, and I mean she got him. Talked him into moving clear out to L.A. so she'd have Hollywood movie stars for neighbors. And the next thing my parents knew, she'd talked them into moving out there, too, so she'd have free baby-sitters. Huh, I know women."

"Oh," Susie said, and didn't have time to wonder what to say next.

"I haven't seen any of 'em for a good two years," Pete grumbled. "Dad offered to take me in with him out there, but I told him I'd take a half-interest in the shop here instead."

"Oh," Susie said again, her pre-image of Pete the young Business Wonder Boy toning down a few shades.

"Maybe I'll go out and visit them this summer," Pete said when Susie made no further comment. "Having you boss me around on KP sure pushes the memory button on the old think machine."

"I know. You've been reminding me of my brother all evening," she answered, suddenly wanting to share her

memories. It was not often that she let thoughts of her dead brother come to surface. Bob had been in the Army for three years before he was killed, and in college before that, so she was used to his absence. It was easier not to remember that this time he wouldn't be coming back. Five years of not remembering had softened the heart-ache, but it could still come back with sad potency.

"He was killed in a car crash," she said in a tone that was careful not to invite sympathy.

"I know." Pete's voice was understanding and warm. "Your dad told me. I'm sorry." But suddenly the tone changed. "Look," he said, "let's get things straight. I'm not a husband-type guy. No honorable intentions. If you want to be friends, that's great. But like they say on the packing boxes, use no hooks. Get somebody else to ring your wedding bells."

A few moments before, Susie might have come back with a flippant retort, but her memories of Bob had brought her emotions too close to the surface for quick concealment.

"What's wrong with wanting to get married?" she threw at Pete in uncontrolled honesty. "Sure, I want wedding bells. But I want to share them with a man who wants to hear them just as much as I do. A man who feels about me the way my father feels about my mother." She lifted her chin defiantly. "If you say that's from Cornsville—O.K. It's how I feel."

"O.K., O.K.," Pete said.

But Susie was not to be stopped. "Maybe you agree with Aunt Ri. She says I was born reaching for the moon."

Pete bristled, as if the mere thought of agreeing with his partner's termagant sister set his teeth on edge. "You tell Aunt Ri the moon's a lot closer than it used to be," he countered belligerently.

Susie's good humor came right side up again and she

gave Pete a comradely grin. At least they were on the same side about one thing.

"Keep in orbit, kiddo. Don't let that Aunt Ri dame deep you off the launching pad," Pete told her. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Speaking of orbits, 'Moon Rocket Murder' is down at the Palace. Let's go."

"'Moon Rocket Murder'?" Susie repeated unbelievably.

"It's better than it sounds," Pete explained. "Technically, that is. They've worked in some Air Force films that were top secret till a few months ago. UFO stuff—Unidentified Flying Objects. Flying saucers really send me. Besides, how else can I sing for my supper? Get your space bonnet, and we'll blast off."

Susie agreed. A date was a date, even when it included a movie about flying saucers and a man who had made such a bald declaration for bachelor freedom.

"Don't waste time putting on more lipstick," Pete drawled. "You'll only get it wiped off."

Susie stopped, blinking, caught once more without camouflage. *Wiped off?* That meant—that meant *kissed off!* Did he think—

"When you eat popcorn," Pete explained blandly. "Everybody eats popcorn at the Palace. Old Middleton custom." His impudent grin told her plainly that he had read her thoughts. "What did you think I meant?" he inquired smoothly.

Susie felt a betraying blush spread over her face and throat in revealing answer.

"Come on," Pete laughed. "What's a little teasing between friends?"

"O.K., friend," Susie said. He'd won this round, and she'd let it stand for the time being. Right now she needed a friend's help in getting acquainted in this strange hometown, getting a job—

She groaned. What job? Where?

Pete's fingers snapped before her eyes. "Hey, there! Like you don't remember I'm around, maybe?"

"You mean you're beginning to care?" Susie flipped back with a demure flutter. She was rewarded with the discovery that Pete Ansel's oval face could blush as hotly as her own.

Chapter 2

MARCH was going out like a polar bear. Susie shivered and took shelter in a drugstore doorway to look again at the remaining names on the crumpled list of job possibilities. She had started out this morning fresh and hopeful, but now her spirits and the list were both battle-scarred. Each criss-cross line meant one more time someone had turned her down.

All the gloomy predictions the girls in Chicago had meant about "a place like Middleton" were certainly coming true. Susie had been sure that her two years at Western, plus experience on summer jobs and at the Chicago printshop, would sound impressive to small-city employers, but for some reason they seemed to think so much moving around wasn't a good sign. She hadn't explained on any of the application forms that she had quit college because her father didn't have the money for tuition after the second year, and that she had left Chicago because her mother needed her, and somehow the bald facts did look as if she couldn't stick at anything. She had thought everything would all come out, but no one gave her much chance.

The weather, she had discovered, could send Middleton business up or down as automatically as it changed the barometer, and right now both were low. Pete had tried to tell her that last night, but she had thought he was only trying to give her an easy out in case she didn't

land a job. Now she knew he was only stating facts. This was farming country. Fruit and truck farmers were Middleton's best customers when crops were good or the weather promising—and the worst ones when a drought or freeze threatened. Right now no farm family was spending money on anything they didn't absolutely need till all threat of a late killer frost was over. If crops were ruined, business was ruined, too. Mid-March should have been the safety line, but tomorrow was April first and the weatherman was still talking about hovering artic air masses. Consequently, Middleton business was hovering, too, in a state of frozen suspension.

Even when good weather came, there wouldn't be as many job opportunities as the fat telephone directory had promised, Susie realized now. Middleton was a fair-sized city—in spite of the railroad station—but a good share of the phone listings were for surrounding valley farms and villages well within range of the new direct dialing. They fattened the phone book, even if they didn't fatten her job prospects. Two people had suggested she try Waverly, thirty-five miles over the hill, but she had come here to be near her mother, so that was out. Susie sighed and looked hopefully at the next name on the list.

Jason's Music Store had advertised for a salesgirl who could play the organ. For demonstration to prospective customers, Susie thought. She couldn't really play, but she did know piano, and if she got the job she could take a few quick lessons. They might even have meant those electric organs one could play even without knowing a thing about music. She checked the address on the street map Pete had drawn for her. Two blocks south and turn left.

The flashing Jason sign with its neon treble clef caught her eye the moment she turned the corner. At least the sign looked prosperous. So did the attractive window

displays, the shining woodwork, and thick carpeting. So did the suavely groomed Jasper Jason, who came out from his mahogany-paneled office with a let's-get-this-over-with air and the obvious intention of interviewing her there at the counter in full view of a row of typists and file clerks as well as any customers who might penetrate to the back of the long store.

Susie swallowed, her well-planned opening vanishing before her embarrassed awareness of watching eyes, and found herself forced to answer Mr. Jason's barrage of fast-paced questions with a blunt, hopeless negative.

No, she couldn't play the organ. No, she hadn't previous selling experience. No, there wasn't anyone in Middleton who could give her a business reference.

"In Chicago," she began, but the way he waved that aside implied that Chicago was in a foreign country and any experience gained there simply could not be applied to Middleton business practice.

"Young woman," Jasper Jason said icily, "it is extremely stupid to apply for a position you are not even remotely qualified to fill. A waste of your time and mine." And with a frigid look of dismissal he wheeled back into his paneled office and shut the door.

Susie stood there, his scathing rebuke the final blow that tore down the last shred of her bulwark against the day's mounting misery. She felt tears trembling against her lashes, a throb and quaver thickening in her throat as she turned away, only to meet the staring eyes at the rows of desks and file cabinets. Some of the eyes were kind, some only curious. It was impossible to stand there facing them, knowing they could see the tears she could not hide.

It was equally impossible to turn and walk past them, Susie discovered. She could no more walk back down that long aisle to the door than she could fly. She gave a desperate glance to the left and saw the huge billboard with the list of Jason's top-selling records. She managed

the three steps that carried her across to it and with steadying hand clutching the gilt frame made a pretense of reading the titles as she struggled for self-control.

She took a deep breath that ended in a gulp. "All the world's a stage," she reminded herself firmly, calling on the magic formula she had used to conquer stage fright ever since her first school play. "All the world's a stage, and this is just another show." She had taken dramatics in school just for the fun of it, but now she found that the ability to replace panic with a carefully calculated pose and gesture was a lifesaver. If only she could save the remnants of her pride with a calm and dignified retreat!

She was concentrating with such determination that she did not realize anyone stood beside her till the girl spoke.

"This is last week's list," she said, so low it was almost a whisper. "I'll have the new one out tomorrow."

"Oh," Susie managed to answer, and turned to see friendly brown eyes, a kind but homely face. One of the listening typists.

"I'm Fran Braley," the half-whisper went on. "How about joining me at the drugstore for a coffee break?"

Without waiting for an answer, she put her hand on Susie's elbow and gently propelled her down the aisle and out the door. "You're new in town, aren't you?" Fran went on, her voice assuming a normal pitch now that there was no danger of being overheard by Mr. Jason. "Where are you from?"

"Chicago." Susie began with a rush of release, and by the time the coffee cups were empty she felt as if she had known Fran Braley for years.

"Don't let it get you," Fran said for at least the tenth time.

Susie shrugged. As Fran had pointed out, Jasper Jason might never have delivered that blast if she had spoken up, if she had explained that her father had just bought

a business and that she expected to be a permanent resident. Any employer had a right to be wary of fly-by-night's. And small towns could be suspicious of "city slickers." Until now she had lived all her life in Chicago, had taken its come-and-go population as a matter of course. She had not realized how unused to strangers a farm community might be, especially one bound round with high hills. The only strangers Middleton was accustomed to were the itinerant workers who came each year to pick fruit.

"Heck, Susie," Fran said, "Middleton even feuds with Waverly. I guess that's mostly the Jasons' fault. The Jasons of Middleton and the Kirks of Waverly are like the Martins and the McCoys. Or maybe a college type like you would understand better if I said like the Montagues and Capulets."

Susie waved the amendment aside. She didn't want to be tagged "highbrow" as well as "stranger."

"I could take a few organ lessons and try again," she said hopefully.

Fran shook her head. "No use. Jasper Jason never changes his mind. He's about as likely to admit he's wrong as the Rock of Gibraltar would be to jump up and do a tango." She glanced at her watch and gasped. "I've got to scoot. Call me, Susie. We'll take in a movie or something."

"Love to. When?"

Fran shrugged with a homely girl's acceptance of facts. "Any time. I'm usually free. And look, Susie. You'll like Middleton, really you will, once you get to know people."

Susie scribbled down the phone number Fran called over her shoulder. If even half the people were as nice as Fran Braley, she really would like Middleton. If she could just get a job—

She started to drag out the crumpled list of job possibilities and then changed her mind. It was late to ask

for interviews. As Fran had said, Monday was a rough day and by midafternoon everybody was at low ebb. No use giving anyone else a chance to sound off at her the way Jason had. Perhaps a letter to pave the way would be better. Or at least she could telephone for an appointment.

Susie put back the list and instead took out the inter-city bus schedule. The Middleton-Waverly line stopped at the Casa Electrica corner, and she could catch a bus right now if she hurried.

Susie took a front seat and kept a sharp lookout for the flashing Casa Electrica sign that would be her signal to ring the bell, but the bus was going at such a fast clip that the sign was almost alongside her before she saw it. She jabbed frantically at the buzzer, but it was too late. And the next stop was a good two blocks farther on.

Walking back those unnecessary blocks brought up again all the misery of defeat that Fran's friendliness had suppressed. Susie's feet ached, her head throbbed. She dragged past the shop door, closed for the night. It seemed at least a mile around the corner and through the archway.

She opened the blue door, and three heads turned as one, three faces looking at her with the same expectant air. Her father, her mother, Pete. Susie gave a silent groan of protest. Why on earth had Dad asked Pete to come to dinner again tonight? It was bad enough to have to report her failure to sympathetic parents, but to have to spill out the tale in front of a man she'd like to impress was a bitter blow.

"Susie," her mother said with a warm undertone of sympathy, "you look absolutely exhausted. Sit down and rest before you tell us a thing."

"Have a drink," Mr. Gryphon said. "Pete's donating the wine."

Susie followed her father's waving gesture, and saw

the bottle and glasses on the tray at Pete's elbow. She groaned again. Pete was not only here at this gruesome moment, he was here to celebrate.

She gave a wan shrug. "Sorry—but there's nothing to celebrate."

Before she could say more Pete was putting a filled glass in her hand, an infectious grin on his oval face. "Well, then, how about drowning your sorrows?" He clinked his glass to hers. "Here's to another try. Down the hatch."

Susie downed a swallow obediently and, warmed by the wine's tangy sweetness, flopped on the sofa ready to begin her tale.

"Rest your tootsies," her father said, shoving a footstool toward her. "Even a half-lion, half-eagle gets sore feet."

Susie threw him a grateful smile. "Guess I'm just half-sparrow, half-dormouse today. Any self-respecting lion or eagle would disown me. Just like Middleton has. Nobody in the whole town wants to hire me."

"What's one day?" Pete spoke up heartily before either of the others could offer consolation. "You haven't even scratched bottom. Remember what the spider said to the fly."

Behind her glasses Susie's eyebrows puckered in a frowning arch. "The spider to the fly?" she repeated in a puzzled tone. "You mean, 'Won't you walk into my parlor?'"

Pete's blue eyes looked blank for a moment, and then he grinned sheepishly. "Guess I've mixed my metaphors again or something. The spider I knew said, 'Try, try again'—I think." He looked so little-boy-bewildered that Susie couldn't help laughing.

"Well," Pete said, shrugging, a hint of a blush on his oval face. "At least I'm good for a laugh."

Susie caught the revealing undertone of embarrass-

ment and stopped mid-chuckle as her mother came to Pete's rescue.

"Your spider was talking to Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland," Mrs. Gryphon said briskly. "And you were quoting it exactly right. That's just what Susie needs to hear."

Pete smiled at Mrs. Gryphon and turned back to Susie. "You hear that? Get out of the cellar. Stop making like from Busterville. You—" Suddenly he looked at his watch and whistled. "I got to cut. Got to be downtown in exactly eighteen minutes, thirty seconds. Very important date."

He was out the door before Susie could do no more than blink with wonder that any girl could command such a split-second punctuality. She must be very special, she thought enviously, and then remembered the wolf whistle and gesture that had gone with Pete's description of Cookie Carson, the glamorous redhead on KMID. In spite of Pete's declaration of disinterest, this date had to be the radio redhead.

"Susie," Mrs. Gryphon said, "it wasn't that bad, was it?"

Susie put the image of Cookie Carson aside. Why should she care whom Pete dated or how precisely he timed his meeting? He'd made it plain enough that as far as she was concerned he was not the Built-in Boy Friend but only the guy next door. A friend.

"No," Susie answered, remembering Fran Braley. "It wasn't all bad. At least I've found a friend."

She went on then to tell the whole story. The only question now was, Where could she look for a job next?

"Sleep on it," her father suggested. "Everything looks better after a night's sleep."

It was good advice, but easier to give than to take. Sleep did not come quickly, and when it finally did bring release it held her so deeply that she did not hear the

morning alarm clock or her father's tread as he brought Mrs. Gryphon a breakfast tray in bed and then left for the shop. A bell ringing insistently finally brought her jumping out of bed in a trance. She stumbled over her slippers, fumbled for her glasses on the nightstand, tried to remember where the telephone was.

"Susie," her mother's voice called from the bedroom. "Telephone for you, dear. Take it in here."

She was still too near asleep to do more than obey, squeaking out a faint, dry-voiced hello into the receiver.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Pete's voice came booming back at her. "Want a job running the KMID switchboard? Call 'em up right now and ask for an interview. I fixed it up for you last night."

Last night, Susie's sleep-fogged brain repeated. Last night. KMID. Redhead Cookie Carson.

"Hey," Pete roused her. "Snap out of it. Answer me. You did tell me you ran the switchboard on that job in Chicago, didn't you? And you can type?"

"Yes—yes. What did you say?" Susie wanted a repeat of good news like that, and her blue eyes came suddenly alive, blinking out excited signals across the bed where her mother lay watching. Just then she caught sight of the calendar on a nearby desk. Today—April First, it warned in bright red letters. *April Fool's Day!* And Pete was just the type to pull an April Fool's joke.

"April Fool to you, too," she said icily. "And if you ask me, I don't think it's very funny."

She was about to slam the phone back on the stand when Pete's spluttering protest stopped her.

"What do you mean, April Fool? This is for 'real. Honest. TKO told me about it last night. He said their girl quit yesterday without notice. Her boy friend came home from the Navy, and she rushed him to the preacher for the I-do scene before he could get his land legs and cut out, the poor sap."

For a moment Susie could not speak. Whirling from

hope to anger and then back to hope again was too wild a swing for a brain not quite awake.

"Look," Pete said, his voice crackling with indignation, "you don't think I'm trying to pull a cheap joke, do you? Because if that's what you think of me, you can—"

"Oh, Pete, no. No, Pete. I think you're wonderful. A job in radiol"

"Well, get on the phone and call 'em before someone else does," Pete ordered. He gave her the number, told her again to be sure to say TKO had recommended her, and hung up in the midst of her thanks.

With a quick explanation to her mother, Susie dialed the radio station with shaky fingers, trying to organize her thoughts so that she could make the right impression. Best foot forward—only it was her best voice she had to use now.

"Good morning, this is KMID," a seductive greeting came over the wire. Susie took a deep breath, introduced herself, and began to talk.

When she hung up a few moments later with a ten o'clock appointment only a short hour away, Susie gave her mother a hug and dashed for action.

"You didn't tell them TKO recommended you," Mrs. Gryphon called after her.

"I decided not to," Susie called back. TKO's personal endorsement might clinch the job for her, but how could she say he had recommended her when all he had done was tell Pete the job was open? She would have to thank TKO, whether she got the job or not. And thank Pete again, too, apologize for sounding off about April Fool jokers.

She was ready at last and rushed down the stairs to find her father waiting, car keys in hand. "I'll run you down," he offered. "Bus might be late. Pete's tending store."

He held the door open for her, his brown eyes giving a

sweeping glance of approval for the navy blue suit with a hint of feminine ruffle at the throat, red pumps, red hat to match.

"You're the All-American Girl," he said with a nod of satisfaction. "That hat's cute, what there is of it. Have to look twice to make sure it's there, don't you?"

He was talking to keep her from getting nervous, Susie decided, and didn't expect an answer. And it was a good thing he didn't, because her head was already whirling with plans for what she would say to the KMID manager that would convince him he should hire her, even without TKO's name as reference.

"Best foot forward," her father said minutes later as he came to a stop in front of an office building with the KMID sign over the door.

Susie jumped out. "Thanks loads. I'll come home on the bus."

He nodded, risking a traffic snarl among the honking cars behind him by taking time to lean out and call "Good luck!"

Susie nodded acknowledgment, waved, then hurried into the building. A glance at the directory told her that the KMID studios were on the sixth floor, and she reached for the elevator button just as the cage came into sight from the basement.

"Going-a oop, six-a floor," a white-haired operator with brigand mustachios said before she could even speak.

Susie blinked as she stepped past him. "How did you know I wanted the sixth floor?"

Black eyes twinkled beneath the drooping white forelock, and the old man tapped his head with a boastful gesture. "Take-'Em-Up Tony always-a know. Pretty girl always-a want KMID."

"Well, thanks for the compliment," Susie said, and then because the old man seemed hopefully expectant of

something more, she added, "I bet you tell that to all the girls."

"Betcha da boots," Tony came back promptly. "Tell-a da girls dey pretty, make 'em feel-a good. Make 'em smile. Den Tony feel-a good." He gave a tug at his snow-white thatch of hair. "Snow on-a da mountaintop no mean ain't got plenty fire down below!" He tapped his heart meaningfully, with a wink for emphasis, and flung open the door. "Six-a floor."

Susie returned the wink and stepped from the car with a feeling of good omen. Across the hallway gold lettering a foot high marked the wide glass KMID doors. A deep breath and she was inside, facing a wallful of photographs. "Million Dollar Music Makers," the sign above them said, and Susie recognized Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Nat King Cole. They were all big-time singers or bandleaders and the golden disks that represented their million-copy hits formed a big dollar sign between the photos. All at once she saw another poster and the headline "Jason's Top Tunes." Her heart went plummeting with a sickening reminder of yesterday's failure. She jerked her eyes away quickly, and they met a supercilious appraisal from the ice-blue eyes of a blond behind the reception desk.

"May I help you?" the blond said, and Susie recognized the seductive voice she had heard on the telephone. The girl matched the artificial smoothness of that voice. The flawless perfection of her makeup was accented by bright golden hair, each wave and circlet in proper place. An armful of jangling golden bracelets struck a discord against the severity of her high-fashion black sheath.

Susie's heart dropped again. If this was how KMID's receptionist was supposed to look, Susan Elaine Gryphon might as well turn around right now and run. "All-American Girl," Dad had called her. Well, whatever

else Miss Seductive Voice might be, all-American girl she was not. But her ice-blue survey demanded an answer. Susie drew up her courage and gave her name. "I have a ten o'clock appointment," she added firmly.

Surprisingly, the blond's face warmed with an almost friendly smile. "Well, two minutes ahead of time," she said, glancing at the clock above the telephone panel at her side. "Mr. Walter Perry, our manager, will see you. I'm Liz Langdon, his secretary. I'm taking the board till he finds someone, and I've been run ragged trying to handle it and do everything else, too. Absolutely ragged."

She gave her sleekly groomed shapeliness a needless gesture of deprecation and then gave Susie a gimlet-sharp survey. "You have run a switchboard before, I hope?"

Susie nodded, glanced at the board behind Liz Langdon's head, and explained confidently that the setup she'd used in Chicago had been much the same, adding enough details to prove that her claim was not a bluff.

Liz Langdon looked relieved, added a few verifying questions of her own, and then said, "I'll tell Mr. Perry you're here." She swung back to the board, and Susie saw her scarlet-tipped nails move with dexterous efficiency—without a flick of wasted energy. Susie's eyes narrowed in judgment. Liz Langdon might have a gold fashion-plate exterior, but underneath she was cold steel.

The scarlet-tipped fingers severed the connection, the gold head swung back to Susie. "He'll be right out," Liz Langdon said. "He's a doll to work for, really. Don't look so much like a scared rabbit."

Susie's lips quirked in rueful acceptance of the thrust. "Half-sparrow, half-dormouse!" She could almost hear Aunt Ri's trumpeting voice seconding the verdict. Then, warned by the sound of approaching footsteps she turned to greet Mr. Perry with a smile. He was a dapper, white-haired man—fifty, perhaps—his overgenerous

mouth curved in a toothy smile. "Miss Gryphon?" he said, hand outstretched.

Susie guessed that he had not expected her to catch his quick lift of eyebrows that sent a question over her head to Liz Langdon. The blond must have answered him with a gesture, for Susie caught the telltale tinkle of bracelet against bracelet. A favorable gesture, it seemed, for now the manager's attention flashed back to Susie, and, with another smile, he invited her into his office to talk things over.

The interview was so much smoother than any Susie had struggled through the day before that she was soon ready to admit that Walter Perry would not only be a doll to work for, but that he was also an expert at asking just the right question to get the information he wanted. She found herself able to tell him her story without embarrassment.

"Ah, Chicago!" Mr. Perry said, sighing. "I know how you hated to leave. I thought I was on top of the world when I was there. Radio was Chicago's golden glamour girl in those days. WGN in the Tribune Building on Michigan Boulevard. WMAQ across the street in the Wrigley Tower—the bridal cake, we used to call it. Looks like a bridal cake, doesn't it? Specially at night with the floodlights on full force."

Susie nodded, her own memory bringing the picture clear as he rambled on.

"WBBM over in the Merchandise Mart. All of them with their own live orchestras, big stars, headline shows. Television was just a pipe dream, and—" He shrugged as if shifting a heavy burden. "Well, the pipe dream came true, and you know the rest. The axe was falling, and I grabbed at Middleton while the grabbing was good. But enough about me. Just wanted to let you know I understand how you feel about Chicago. But you'll like Middleton. It's a good little town."

Susie didn't say anything, complete honesty forbidding the white lie of agreement, and the manager eyed her questioningly.

"Not engaged to some fellow back in Chicago, are you? Or even—how is it my daughter puts it? Engaged to be engaged?"

"No, sir," Susie said, wondering why he asked such a personal question, and then remembered Fran's remark about Middleton's phobia against come-and-go strangers. "I'm sure to be living in Middleton till my mother is completely well again. At least a year, probably longer. My parents came to stay, so this is home."

"Good!" the manager said heartily. "Very good. It's a nuisance to get a girl trained and then have her skedaddle off and get married without so much as a by-your-leave. Well, what salary did you have in mind?"

Susie swallowed, the question catching her unprepared. "I'll leave that to you, Mr. Perry," she managed to answer without too much hesitancy, and added a phrase she had read in a book on business etiquette: "I trust there will be a chance for advancement when I prove my worth."

The words hung in the air with a too-pat and parroted sound, but evidently the manager was not displeased.

"Fair enough," he agreed, stroking his long lip between thumb and forefinger. "We have a five-day week for the office staff. Of course the dj's and the engineers out at our transmitter on Pine Hill have to keep us on the air Saturdays and Sundays, too, but you'll always have a two-day week end. Let's see, shall we say—"

He paused and Susie was sure he could hear her heart hammering.

"Fifty-five a week, to start? You'd get more in Chicago, but you'd have to spend a lot more there, too."

"That's fine," Susie heard herself say calmly, and then the manager was telling her that Liz Langdon would ex-

plain all about payroll deductions, social security, withholding tax, provisions for purchase of savings bonds and insurance. The blond was in charge of personnel and payroll, as well as being private secretary. Mr. Perry explained the dual role apologetically.

"Not like the old days. Radio's a penny-pinching spinster now, not a glamour girl. Pinch still more if we ever get good television reception over that hump of hills between here and Waverly."

He sounded wistful, but there was no echo of regret in the way Liz Langdon played her role. She was crisp and efficient when she presented Susie with the cards and forms for new employees, and Susie took pains to fill hers out as neatly as the flawlessly dressed blond obviously considered necessary.

So far so good, she thought, re-reading her carefully rounded script. Just then the board buzzed for an incoming call, and Susie jumped, sending a huge ink blot across the card.

"Really!" Liz said with an exasperated downward twist of smoothly rouged lips. "I'll have to go clear back to my desk for another card."

She swished down the hall, high heels tapping impatiently, and Susie heard her answer Walter Perry's low-pitched summons. At that moment the board buzzed again. Susie tensed. Should she answer it? Liz had not yet explained procedure or turned the board over to her, and she might label such unauthorized procedure as sheer brass. But on the other hand, Susie had definitely been hired to handle the switchboard. Without further hesitancy she slipped into the empty chair, made the proper connection, and almost unconsciously gave a tremulous but true copy of Liz's voice.

"Good morning, this is KMID."

"Good morning to you, beautiful." It was a man's voice, suave, and familiar. Susie frowned. Where had she heard it before?

"May—may I help you?" she asked, borrowing another Liz Langdon phrase, but this time the voice was more her own pleasantly fresh tone.

There was a pause; then, "Liz? Or Dixie? Who is this?"

Susie smiled. She knew now why that voice had been familiar. Ollie Oop. Terence Kensington Oliphant. Pete's TKO.

"I'm the new receptionist, thanks to you, Mr. Oliphant," she said all in a rush. "I'm Susie Gryphon, the girl Pete Ansel told you about last night. And I'm terribly grateful. Thanks a million."

"I'll collect on that," TKO came back. His voice positively ogled, and Susie couldn't repress a giggle.

"You as cute as Pete claims?" TKO went on. "Tell me all about yourself, baby. You listen to my show?"

"Yes. That is, I did the other day. And I knew your voice was familiar the minute you asked for Liz—"

A steely grip on her arm jerked Susie about face to meet Liz Langdon's blazing glare. "Here's Liz now," she gulped out and vacated the chair considerably faster than she had preempted it.

Susie bent over the replaced card thrust at her by the scarlet-tipped fingers, her face almost matching their hue. She tried not to listen to Liz's husky-voiced words, but at such close range it was impossible not to hear. Evidently Liz expected to meet TKO for lunch.

While Susie kept her eyes averted from Liz Langdon, she saw two men and then a girl with an amazing head of bright purple ringlets come past the desk, pause to nod at Liz, pass over Susie with a vague smile, and then flick a sliding peg across a slot on a wooden board. A sign-out board, Susie realized, noting the alphabetical list of surnames beside each slot. A handy gadget for her when desk phones went unanswered. There was a microphone beside the desk for paging, too. She scanned the sign-out board again, checking for Cookie Carson, TKO,

and Dan Tucker, Pete's other friend. Their pegs were all at Out.

"Well," Liz said, interrupting with a bracelet-clinking sweep toward her vacated chair, "it's all yours, little eager beaver. Since you're so willing to take charge, I'll just let you. You can go to lunch when Dixie Elliott gets back. She's the one with the purple hair. And just remember this—when a man asks for me, there's no need for you to start a conversation. Do you understand?"

"I'm sorry—" Susie began.

Liz cut her short: "Just don't let it happen again!"

Susie opened her mouth and shut it again. If Liz was annoyed at her just for talking to TKO, she'd be livid if she knew Susie had heard about the job through the dj. "No, Miss Langdon, I won't," she said finally, with what she hoped was convincing meekness.

"My name is Liz," the blond told her coldly, and then made it clear that she had not spoken with intent of friendship. "We're all on first-name basis here. It's Walter's—Mr. Perry's—request."

She swept down the hall to her office and presently swept back again, in black faille coat and feather wisp of a hat, looking more than ever like a fashion-plate figure straight out of *Vogue*. She flicked her peg to Out: 1:30, and swept through the glass doors with a regal air. Susie heard the opening of the elevator doors, Tony's hail, and the moment the doors clanged shut again, she reached for the phone and put in a call to home. She had not answered half her mother's happy questions when she broke off with a whispered, "Got to go. Here comes the boss."

And right on Walter Perry's heels was an athletic-looking young man who drew up to stare at Susie with a puzzled frown.

"Something wrong, Scott?" Walter asked him.

The athletic young man waved a sheaf of papers. "I

told Maud I'd get Liz to type this. It's that new format for plugging Jason's top tunes on Hip Hildebrand's show. You know Jason wants to O.K. it personally, and Hip wants to hustle it down there right after lunch and catch him in a good mood."

The manager nodded. "Liz has gone, but here's Susie. She'll do it." He gave an introductory wave. "Scott Darnell, our program director, Susie. He's helping me pare the budget by getting along without a secretary, so he'll call on you now and then for a little help. This happens to be a rush job because—well, any top-tunes tie-up is a little ticklish, you know."

"I know," Susie said. Who didn't know about the payola hit-list scandals? She began an exploratory search for paper, carbon, eraser.

"Er—Susie," Walter halted her, "when I said 'ticklish,' I didn't mean there was anything shady about this deal. It's just that Jason's a little—er—difficult—to handle sometimes. Very smart operator, though. You don't have to worry about any payola." He made a half-wistful gesture of explanation. "I hate to admit it, but KMID just isn't big enough for payola. Middleton isn't Chicago, by a long sight. Hip couldn't make a song hit even if he played it every hour on the hour."

Over his shoulder Susie saw that a chubby brown-eyed man had come through the glass doors and was standing there listening, a surly scowl on his dark face. Suddenly Walter seemed to catch Scott's warning signal and looked around.

"Oh, Hip. Just talking about that Jason deal," he said without making the slightest attempt to explain his last remark. "Here's Susie, our new reception gal. She'll type it up for you."

"Hi," Hip greeted Susie sourly as the manager cleared his throat to reclaim Susie's attention.

"We're a little station, Susie, but we've got a big net-

work behind us," Walter said with a pointedness that must have been aimed at the disgruntled dj. "KMID has a real program, and that's more than some of the big studios can say these days. We're no push-button news and music outfit. You won't be ashamed to be one of us."

"I'll be proud to be one of you," Susie said promptly, and meant it. She was proud—and excited—to be "in" radio. Walter and Liz both had indicated that she might be called on to do a bit of everything, and Susie was hoping that might mean writing sales jingles, or even getting on the air for some bit parts. Of course a little station like KMID didn't offer the opportunities of a station in Chicago—

Susie put the comparison aside with a determined air. Big or little, Middleton was where she was, and she was going to make the best of it. She'd make this first assignment so letter perfect, even Liz would be impressed.

She heard Walter say, "Lunch, Scott?" as the two went out, and when the glass doors closed behind them, Hip Hildebrand seemed to grow at least an inch.

"Make with the rake," he ordered, snapping peremptory fingers under her nose. "Take ten and blow."

"Do what?" Susie asked, blinking. She wasn't a complete stranger to jive talk, but Hip seemed to take it off on a tangent all his own.

"Blow, chick, blow. Take one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten and *blow*." He tapped a finger for each count and waved at the typewriter. "Get with the gig." He was hunching his shoulders, snapping his fingers, jiggling and wiggling as if to some inaudible music, and Susie couldn't help laughing.

"You mean—like get to work?" she queried.

He planted both hands firmly on the desk in front of her as if holding himself down to earth. "You got it all," he affirmed. "Man, like I need it now. This Jas Jason can sure keep you hangin'."

"I know what you mean," Susie said in fervent sympathy, remembering how grateful she had been yesterday for Fran Braley's rescue. Suddenly she snapped her fingers, blue eyes sparking. "Hip! I've got an idea!" She reached for a word that would fit in with the dj's own jivy vernacular. "I've got a gasser!"

Chapter 3

THE first three days at KMID had swum by in a patternless haze with everything new hitting her all at once, but now, on Friday, Susie gave Take-'Em-Up Tony his usual morning smile and hurried to her desk, feeling very much the on-the-job professional.

"Fifteen minutes early," she noted approvingly, with a glance at the clock. She had planned to be early, for everyone had warned her that preparing for the Saturday-Sunday holiday made "Frantic Friday" the weekly battle cry.

She could see the stern gray-haired continuity chief, Maud Harrow, already at her desk. Maud, along with doll-like Nikko Sullivan, the little Hawaiian traffic secretary, would bear the brunt of the extra load, for it was up to continuity and traffic to see that every minute of the broadcast day was accounted for, from the six A.M. Wake-Up Show to the midnight sign-off, with network sponsors and local sponsors all given their exact allotment of minutes. And minutes on a radio station, Susie had already discovered, were a precise sixty seconds, chopped off as needed at exact ten-, fifteen-, or twenty-second intervals to allow for the shorter commercials and station-identification breaks. Each dj had so much unlogged time to use for his ad lib chatter and records, but network newscasts or paid announcements were sent

out on the air right on schedule. To keep this schedule foolproof, Maud typed each item on a separate piece of paper and filed them all in sequence in a huge looseleaf notebook, one for each day. Everything that was needed to keep KMID on the air in a continuous pattern went in that book--commercial, program sign-on's and closings, public service bulletins, cue-sheet reminders to call the weather bureau for direct broadcast, everything.

Maud's work wasn't done till the big black book for the following day was posted in Studio A beside the control board, within easy reach of the dj's hand. In the bin beside the turntables she filed the recorded commercials, each in its own jacket and labeled with the same cue number Nikko had typed on the log. Heaven might spare the dj who pulled out the wrong one, but Maud Harrow wouldn't. She had her own blows to take from Vance Saunders, the sales manager, and his crew of three when an ad was read at the wrong time. Some of the big companies wouldn't even pay for a commercial read off schedule, and even the corner grocery could put up a howl that the salesman had to suffer through, apologize for, somehow explain.

Friday meant Maud's work was trailed with books for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday all to be filled, and consequently Susie had been warned that on Friday she was expected to give continuity every possible help.

"I'm here, Maud," she called out. "Have to get the mail sorted first; then I'll be ready."

Acting as Maud's Girl Friday didn't excuse Susie from any of her regular duties. She still had to run the switchboard, relay messages, handle visitors, sort and distribute the mail. Mail delivery gave her a welcome chance to stretch her legs. Then, Dixie Elliott, the girl with the fantastic purple curls, took over at the switchboard.

Susie was thankful that it was the friendly Dixie she had to call to spell her for coffee break and lunch hour, not Liz Langdon. Evidently that telephone mixup with

TKO still rankled, for the tall blond had granted Susie small allowance for a beginner's slowness, accenting each comparison with her own superefficiency with her icy-blue glare.

"For once, I'm going to get this mail sorted right—and before Liz even gets here," Susie told herself as she bent to the task. At least everyone but Liz seemed satisfied with her first week's work. Hip Hildebrand, the jivy dj, had really poured on thanks for her help. Her "gasser" had clinched the Jason deal, he told everyone, and Susie had modestly passed on the praise to Fran Braley. All she herself had done was phone Fran and ask her help in getting Hip in to Jason's office during one of the store owner's rare good moods. The praise was nice to hear, but it also seemed to mean that when anyone had an unpleasant task ahead, the natural solution was "Here's Susie—she'll do it."

Hip had invited Susie to lunch one day next week—"Take on the grease at the corner spoon" was the way he phrased it—and he had insisted that Fran be invited, too. Fran had accepted with pathetic eagerness, her homely face unbelievably alight.

"Poor Fran, she's got it bad," Susie thought as she fished a letter addressed to Clara Coggins out of the Unknown pile and added it to the others for Cookie Carson. "Cookie," so Scott had explained, was a studio name to be used by whoever handled the women's show. In the old days stations hung on to these stage names as protection against a star's taking off in a tantrum, carrying her well-known name to another network. There was not much danger of that now, when so few stations had air personalities, but Walter Perry was all for keeping things as much like old times as possible. Dan Tucker used his own name. So did both TKO and Hip Hildebrand, also Wacky Williams, the dj who did the Wake-Up Show. But "Cool Cal Cooper, the Lariat Looper" was an obvious concoction, specially chosen to fit the Western music

broadcast each afternoon from KMID's Bar-None Ranch.

Chatterbox Dixie Elliott had had a story to tell about each one, apparently taking it for granted that her role as Susie's relief also made her a committee of one to relay office gossip. But her chatter wasn't malicious, and she talked about herself as freely as she did the others. She had come up unasked with a droll explanation for her purple curls. Her prematurely gray hair was an insult to her Yankee husband, while the usual beauty-parlor blue rinse would make her own Confederate ancestors turn over in their graves. "As if," she had giggled, "they weren't plumb dizzy already—flippin' 'cause I married me a Yankee."

Though a giggler and a chatterbox, Dixie was friendly and kind, and she excited Susie's special sympathy for doll-like Nikko Sullivan. Like Dixie, the little Hawaiian had married against her parents' wishes, and now she was too proud to write them that her Navy corpsman husband had deserted her and their small son. Nikko carried a heavy load, outside working hours as well as at the traffic desk. The complicated traffic log with its split-second timing and careful balance of commercials, music, news, and network commitments required painstaking attention to detail, but Nikko tackled it with enthusiasm.

"Susie, honey," Dixie had said after summing up Nikko's woes, "you think twice before you tie that little old wedding knot—hear? You aren't getting any crazy notions TKO means all those sweet nothin's he keeps tellin' you, are you?"

"Heavens, no!" Susie had protested, and remembering now, she wished she could have kept back the blush that went with the denial. She wasn't falling for TKO, but it was fun to have him come in each afternoon, greeting her with flirtatious compliments, taking it for granted that she was thrilled by it all. Somehow he had twisted her thanks for his help in getting her into KMID into a

declaration of devotion, pointing her out to everyone as his "number one fan girl." At least to everyone but Liz. Susie noticed that TKO timed his flirtations to come at the hour Liz was safely anchored in Walter Perry's office for afternoon conference.

Susie's fingers touched an envelope of a familiar silky texture. No need to look at the address to know that it said Terence Kensington Oliphant in very feminine handwriting. There had been one just like it every day this week—which meant, of course, that Liz's claim on TKO wasn't exclusive. "So let her make with the gimlet glares when TKO talks to me," Susie mumbled belligerently.

The elevator door clanged its warning, and Susie swept the last letter into place and got set to meet Liz with head a-tilt.

"Whoa, there," Oley Olson the chief engineer hailed her. "What makes you so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed? Woops—I know—Frantic Friday."

"My first, but I hope not my last," Susie answered.

Oley flipped through the criss-cross stack of letters to find his own small allotment. "I'll take mine now. And everything for dj alley, too. Save you a few steps today. Don't give up the ship."

He was off, whistling, with a wave for answer to Susie's thanks. Before the day was out she'd probably be thankful for the saved steps, but right now she was a bit sorry she'd miss the banter and byplay that went with mail delivery. Dan Tucker always had some friendly word in his low-pitched melodious voice, always had time to explain the fascinating intricacies of radio broadcasting. Thanks to Dan she was learning quite a bit about the switches, lights, and meters on the big studio control board—what must be done and why to keep KMID on the air. Actually, she talked to Dan much more than she did to TKO or any of the others, but no one ever teased her about Dan. Like Pete, everyone seemed

to take for granted that the Magic Melody Man was the property of Cookie Carson. Besides, Dan never flirted. He was just friendly—and very serious about radio. Even Pete never asked her about Dan, but he certainly was curious about what TKO said and did and whether he'd asked her for a date.

"If I didn't know Pete better," Susie thought, "I'd say he was jealous."

But there wouldn't be the time for a flirtation with TKO to make Pete jealous. Maud Harrow would keep her too busy. TKO called Maud "The Grim Gray Grouch," and everyone else at KMID seemed wary of incurring her ire by neglect of duty. Maud was a stickler for accuracy, Dixie had warned Susie. So far such warnings had been needless. Maud had been anything but grouchy, her face lighting up like Mr. Perry's at Susie's mention of Chicago. And like Mr. Perry, she had been ready with reminiscences about the old days of radio before television relegated it to second billing. Maud had worked her way up in continuity when writing for radio meant doing real shows—comedies, mysteries, the ever-continuing soap operas—and when Susie had asked hopefully about her own chances in writing, Maud had given an impatient flick of her long, capable fingers and said that continuity today was mostly embroidery to hold newscasts and music programs together.

"Here," Maud said now at Susie's elbow, as if the thought had conjured her up out of thin air. "Six copies of this, Susie. Double-spaced, wide margins, no overstrikes. Remember, the announcer can't do a good job of reading if you don't do a good job of typing. Put all instructions in capital letters and underscore the whole line, as I explained yesterday. Use this for a sample."

"Yes, ma'am," Susie said, taking the yellow sheets.

The continuity chief went over each step on the sample sheet, explaining what must be done and why, her voice clipped and curt. "I suppose," she said when she

had finished, "that by the time you know what to do, you'll take off for the nearest TV studio. No one's content to stay in radio any more."

"I just wish I really were 'in' radio," Susie returned, piqued by the curtness. "All I do is answer the phone and type somebody else's stuff."

Maud gave her a look. "Humph! Well, remember the way to get 'in' radio is to *be* there."

She walked away, and Susie shrugged. "Whatever that means—the way to get in radio is to be there!" she mumbled, reaching for her typewriter.

"Well!" It was Liz Langdon, her voice teeming with amused condescension. "Talking to yourself already." Then she spied the pile of carefully sorted letters and checked them with expert speed. "Hmm," she said. "All right. If Frantic Friday has this effect on you, I say good for Frantic Friday."

She swept on, and Susie gritted her teeth. "That," she told herself, "is probably as close to a compliment as la Langdon can get!"

As Frantic Friday progressed to a tumult pace, Susie tried to remind herself that the mountain of work was the taskmaster, not Maud. The grim-voiced chief made it clear that there was a reason for her precise demands. The words in each commercial had to be counted so that there would be no doubt that the ad would fit its time slot. If copy ran too long, the announcer would have to rattle through so fast, no one would be able to understand him. If it ran too short, he'd have to fill in with ad libs, saying goodness knew what, even something that might offend the sponsor.

The sponsor, Susie gathered, was patron saint and bogeyman rolled into one. No sponsor, no pay. No pay, no radio. No commissions for the salesmen—Bill Kelly, Russ Brendover, and Ted Heath—who were slipping in and out today trying to keep out of Vance Saunders' sight till they'd filled the weekly quota the hard-selling,

whip-cracking sales manager had set. Each of them had put up a special plea for Susie's help, warning her to hold any messages till they called back. They'd call, they assured her. No need to run to Vance.

And they had no sooner gone out than Vance himself came by with strict orders that he was to be notified of any problems the salesmen weren't on hand to solve.

"Today's Friday," Vance cracked out. "On Fridays you have to pretend there's no tomorrow."

"You mean there really is?" Susie said, grinning.

Vance snapped back a sharp reprimand: "I wasn't joking," and went striding back to his office. Susie wearily straightened her shoulders and resumed pounding out copy on her typewriter. She could understand why the salesmen wanted to stay out of Vance Saunders' way on Friday, but their frequent calls were only adding to the day's frantic pace.

By four o'clock she was ready to make an exhausted protest that "frantic" was rank understatement—that even with all the warning groans she had not been prepared for the demands on her time, not only from Maud, but from everyone. "If anyone says 'Here's Susie, she'll do it' just one more time, I'll—I'll scream!" she said to herself as she whisked out glue bottle and label for the package Cookie said had to go in the mail right now.

She did not hear the elevator doors clang, and TKO's stage-whisper "Hi!" right in her ear made her jump.

"Oh, you!" Susie said, exasperated, wiping up the spilled glue.

TKO looked aggrieved. "Is that all the welcome I get from my number one fan girl? Don't you love me any more, baby? Come on, let's kiss and make up."

"Please, TK, this is Friday," Susie said, eying the pile of copy still waiting in the box beside her typewriter. TKO's day was just beginning, and he had a full hour to get his records from the music library, read over the commercials filed in the black book, pick up any sports news

just coming in on the ticker tape. Most of the sports news was already on the big hook in the newsroom, put there by Scott Darnell, who read and clipped news items as they rolled off the wire in a cascading yellow heap.

TKO swung to a perch on the desk beside her as if he intended to stay all afternoon. "Today's Friday," he said, chucking her under the chin. "Tomorrow's Saturday, next day's Sunday. Week end all gone, and no kiss in sight. You waiting for me to take you up Pine Hill, baby?"

Exasperated and weary as she was, Susie felt her heart take a surprised leap. She had only half listened to TKO's nonsense, and right this minute she didn't know whether a "Yes" would mean she had or had not accepted a date. Before she could fake it through to get a more definite question, a long gray arm reached past her and brushed TKO off the desk.

"Run along, Terence," Maud Harrow's flat voice ordered. "Leave this child alone. She has work to do." Almost in the same brusque tone Maud added, "Five copies, Susie. Be sure to use new carbons. Wide margins. Haven't you finished that Flower Shop spot yet?"

"Just one more line," Susie apologized, but Maud had answered her own question with a glance at the sheet in Susie's typewriter and was already on the way back to her duties. TKO's thumb went to his nose in a waggish gesture that sent Susie's fingers stumbling into compound error. She reached for her eraser with a gasp of panic, but fortunately the ramrod Harrow back kept right on going.

Even TKO wouldn't linger after marching orders from Maud, but he leaned over Susie's desk for a whispered farewell, using his favorite trick of borrowing a popular tune for his own words. "Don't go a-riding up old Pine Hill with anyone else but me!" he sang huskily, and winked.

Susie went back to work, still not sure if he had ac-

tually been asking for a week-end date. She would have had to say no. Pete was taking her to the movies again Saturday, and for a ride to see the valley orchards on Sunday.

She yanked the finished copy out of the machine and went hurrying in to Maud, who was filling the black book with skillful darting dips into the open file drawer at her right elbow. "Here," Maud said, scarcely pausing in her work. "I need twenty copies of this. You'll have to cut a stencil. You know how—"

The insistent buzzing of the switchboard came around the corner, drowning her out. Susie couldn't be rude to Maud, but the board was her first duty. It could be Mr. Perry. Or an important customer. One of the salesmen with a big order. She threw a haphazard apology over her shoulder and sped back to her desk.

"Good afternoon. KMID," she said breathlessly, yanking her headset back on with reckless speed.

A rasping voice she did not recognize rattled off a cryptic demand for somebody who could take a spot. That meant accept copy for a commercial—Susie knew enough radio jargon for that. But the salesmen were all out. So was Vance. Even Dixie did not answer. Susie tried phones, paged Dixie on the intercom with no results. Walter Perry had gone out sometime earlier.

"Are you dead and buried?" the rasping voice demanded. "This is Bob Weeks at Freyer's. We want ten, thirty-second spots tomorrow before noon. Cowcatchers or hitchhikers with the weather forecast. I'll dictate copy now, and you can call back later and verify times. Here goes: 'Weatherman predicts freeze. Freyer's predicts you'll save money—'"

He paused, fortunately, and Susie's fingers scrambled to catch up. She did not notice that she was writing on the back of the copy Maud had just given her. It was not until she was hurrying into the continuity office with

Freyer's copy in hand that she saw what she had done.

"What's wrong?" Maud barked, reaching for the copy. Then she saw Susie's jottings. "What on earth possessed you to write on the back?" she demanded acidly.

Susie told her, quivering inwardly, but standing her ground. The rasping voice had given her no time to look. She had grabbed the first piece of paper in sight. She hadn't even dared ask what the rasping voice meant by "cowcatchers" and "hitchhikers" and hoped she hadn't misunderstood. She said the words now, her voice a doubting query.

"Cowcatchers come just before some other spot," Maud explained impatiently. "Hitchhikers follow. To get in on a peak listening audience. Usually some network news, but Freyer's always rides the weather forecast." She let out a sigh. "You don't have to read the barometer. If Freyer's is rushing in with a pile of ads, you know it's changing."

"A freeze," Susie said, her own voice grim as she thought of the orchards, the truck gardens. Freyer's was advertising specials on smudge pots, plastic plant tepees, outdoor heaters.

Suddenly Maud saw the notation "Ten times before noon."

"Why didn't you say so?" she barked at Susie. "Don't you know tomorrow's log is already mimeographed? Did you check with sales? Nikko? Really—!" She threw up her hands in exasperation, her thin lips tight.

Susie drew herself up to every inch of her five-feet-two. "Vance and Walter are out. So are all the salesmen," she said haughtily, thoroughly resenting the implication that she had acted like a thoughtless child. "And I was told to help you any way possible. I know Freyer's is one of our best customers. You didn't want me to lose their business, did you?"

Maud dismissed the question with a flip of bony fin-

gers. "No, child, no." She handed the copy back to Susie. "You'll need to make dittos for both of these. You have stencils?"

"Yes," Susie said, and Maud waved her back to battle, calling out to Nikko in the adjoining office to bring Saturday's log for revision.

Susie returned to her desk although her shoulder muscles were aching, partly from the tension of the afternoon's mad pace, partly from the nerve-wracking certainty that the fury would go whirling on till midnight. At least long past quitting time. "Well, one word at a time," she thought doggedly.

By a miracle the board was quiet and she got both stencils cut without further interruption. Dixie came hurrying in, full of apologies for overstaying her coffee break, and whisked the stencils off to the ditto machine, bringing them back in record time, sorted and stacked for easy filing. Susie delivered them to Maud and came back to sink down in her chair with a sprawl of relief. Unless something more came along, she was through, ready to go home on time, thanks to Dixie's help. Just five more minutes—

A light blinked on the board. The newsroom, wanting an outside line. Susie gave herself an admonitory *tsk!* She knew she was supposed to leave the newsroom and Studio A telephones plugged for outside connections. In all the rush and turmoil she'd forgotten.

"Good night, honey chile," Dixie called, sailing past, her tight purple ringlets shining. "Don't work too late."

Others were leaving, too. Susie answered their farewells. Apparently they took it for granted that she would be working overtime. She sighed, wondering if she ought to ask Maud if she could leave. "I suppose so," she decided, reluctant to risk further assignment, and swung about to meet Liz Langdon's caustic survey.

"Well, you certainly look like the end of a hectic day," Liz said, as faultlessly chic as at the day's beginning.

"Good heavens, child, can't you do something with that stringy hair of yours? It's all over the place. I wouldn't mention it, but Walter simply can't stand sloppiness. Your glasses are halfway down your nose, too. I'm sure you can't afford contact lenses on your salary, but you could do something with your hair, couldn't you? After all, people have to look at you."

Susie could only stare. Weariness had already pushed her close to the brink of exhaustion, and now this tirade seemed more than she could bear.

Liz shrugged expressively at the lack of response, as if calling on witness to a condition beyond hope, and swept out through the glass doors.

"Well, for unadulterated brass, she's the limit," Cookie Carson's voice said behind Susie's back. "What's the deal, pet? You taking TKO right out from under her nose?"

Susie gave the sympathetic redhead a wan smile, noting how Cookie's green eyes were boring contemptuously through the glass door. There was no love lost between Cookie and Liz—Susie knew that without an assist from Dixie's gossip. Partly it was plain female-to-female rivalry, but a large share was due to Liz's fashion-plate poaching on the glamour that only studio personalities were supposed to claim. Liz was staff, not personality.

"Don't mind Her Majesty, pet," Cookie went on, a consoling hand on Susie's shoulder. "She's sourer than last year's borsht."

Susie looked up to give the phrase due appreciation and saw Dan Tucker watching over Cookie's shoulder, a frown on his angular face.

"Women!" he snorted.

For once there was no twinkle in the Melody Man's gray eyes, and Susie hoped he didn't include her in that snort of condemnation. He probably did. Probably he hated sloppy hair as much as Walter Perry did.

"I'm sorry," she said, with a gulp. "My hair's always a mess. But it won't be after I get it cut like Dixie's—"

"More purple snakes!" Dan howled, shuddering. "I couldn't take it. Pink elephants, yes. A man has to face those now and then. Purple snakes, no."

His wildly exaggerated grimace made Susie forget her misery. "Oh, not the same color," she assured him. "Just short like hers. I'd have nightmares if I had to sleep on purple snakes. Not that pink elephants would be any better." She began giggling almost hysterically and had to struggle to regain control. "I need a permanent as well as a hair cut, and I can't afford either one till after payday, so I guess you'll just have to put up with me the way I am for a while." She hadn't meant to plead for sympathy, but there was undeniably a quaver in those last words.

"We'll manage," Dan said, his gray eyes twinkling now, trying to tease up a smile. "Haven't yet seen anyone turned to stone at your glance."

Susie smiled, in spite of herself, and was suddenly aware that Cookie was studying her with narrowed green eyes of speculation, her coral-tinted lips pursed to a calculating pout.

"No," Cookie said. "We won't put up with you the way you are. I've got an idea. And no copying Dixie. A short cut like hers, and your perm would go all to frizz. Take off only an inch, get a permanent that will give you plenty of body and a good strong end curl so it'll turn way under. Take off that horrible head thingumajig and I'll show you." She snatched off Susie's headpiece and with deft fingers smoothed the straggling tresses to a soft curve. "See? With bangs across the front it'll look like a gold helmet for King Arthur's knights."

Dan chuckled. "Elaine, the pure, Elaine the fair, gold-helmet maid of Astolat."

Cookie swept him a green-eyed glance. "Quoting Tennyson at your age?"

"Who started it?" he returned.

He was teasing, but Susie was sure she caught an un-

dertone of annoyance in Dan's usually melody-clear voice. Was Dixie right in predicting that the two were about to *pfft*?

"Elaine's my middle name," she blurted out, dreading to be caught in a lovers' quarrel.

"It'll be mud if we don't do something with this hair of yours before Monday. Liz Langdon is Walter's right hand, ear, eye, nose, and tongue. Better pacify her. Look, pet, you take my date at the Powder Box tonight and pay me back later. Now no argument. You'll be doing me a favor. I just turned Dan down for a dinner date because I'd never get Marie to touch my hair again if I canceled at this late hour. Now you take my place, and I'll go with Dan. It's a break for me, really."

She swished around, giving a long-lashed look of green provocation at Dan. "Come on, Danny Boy. So gallant and say *you're* getting the break."

Susie was almost certain she had caught Dan in a start of surprise, but now he came through so promptly that she must have been mistaken.

"The breaks falleth my way, oh fair one," he said, sweeping Cookie a knightly bow.

Cookie gave Susie a nudge. "Get your things. Stop worrying. I've got a charge account at the Powder Box, and it isn't due till the fifteenth."

The edge came back into Dan's voice. "Don't let Cookie talk you into anything you don't want to do, Susan Elaine."

"Oh, but I want to," Susan protested. "Only I've got to call my mother first. She'd worry."

Dan's sensitive face reflected approval, but Cookie thrust a line plug into Susie's hand with a frown. "Then call her. But hurry. It's late. Even the Grim Gray Maud and patient Nikko are getting ready to go."

The beauty shop was only three blocks away. The three of them hurried along in the chill night air, and Cookie shooed Dan into the corner pizzeria to wait

while she went along to explain just what she meant by a helmet hairdo.

"I'll come back after dinner to see how you're doing," she promised when Susie was installed under Marie's capable hands. "Want me to bring you a sandwich?"

"Oh, if you would, please!" Susie said, already feeling the pangs of hunger.

But her hunger and her tension from the day's trials seemed to vanish under the operator's ministrations, flowing out with the water down the shampoo board, and by the time the permanent was finished and Marie handed her the mirror for final inspection Susie was wrapped in a cocoon of fatigue. Cookie had not returned, but Susie, looking into the mirror at the shining transformation of her helmet, could only be grateful to her. The bangs had banished the straggling strands; the tight undercurl took care of the rest. And it would stay put because it was simplicity itself.

Susie stepped out into the night air, hunching her shoulders against the cold, and then suddenly stood still. It was not nearly as cold as when she'd left the studio. And the wind was from the south! That hovering arctic air mass that had threatened the big freeze would be blown right back to the north pole where it belonged. The valley farms and orchards were saved. Susie had a flash picture of Bob Weeks at Freyer's tearing his hair out over those ads for smudge pots and plastic tepees, and suddenly leaned against the building in helpless laughter.

A long-legged figure sprang out of a car at the curb and came leaping to her side.

"Susie!" Dan's voice and hands both reached for her. "What's the matter?"

She tried to tell him, managing somehow to stop the hysterical flow. He shook his head, and Susie knew what he was going to say even before the one word came rumbling out.

"Women!"

He took off her hat and whirled her under the street light for inspection, winding up with a wolf whistle that set Susie to giggling again.

"Terriffic! Even Liz will go for this!"

"Y-y-you believe in miracles?" Susie stuttered, through giggles that couldn't hide the bitterness beneath.

"Now there speaks an empty stomach," Dan decreed. "No food, no faith, as my grandmother used to say. Come on, and I'll buy you a pizza, and you'll give even Liz her due."

Susie blinked. "You mean you and Cookie waited for me?"

Dan's snort got full play again. "You don't know Cookie's appetite, I see. No, little one, Cookie waits for no one. She's been wined, dined, and delivered to her door. She was just about to treat me to a little hi-fi when she remembered your sandwich, and I came back to make good."

Susie was aghast. He had left Cookie to come back and make good on her promise! She must really have him in line to demand service like that. "You shouldn't have," she protested.

Dan took her arm. "Come on. I'm going to get some food in you." He hurried her down the street, through the door, across to a corner booth. "When's the last time you ate?" he growled at her.

"Noon. Eleven o'clock, rather. I had to go early because Bill Kelly wanted me back at twelve to take a call."

"Women! What do they use for brains?" He shrugged. "Well, as my grandmother used to say, 'Blessed is he who expects little, for he shall not be disappointed.'"

Susie couldn't suppress a twinkle. "That's the second time tonight you've quoted your grandmother. She must be pretty smart."

"Plenty smart." Dan's angular face was serious, and he did not look up to catch the blue smile in Susie's eyes. "I wish I'd written down more of the things she used to say."

"The way I heard it, most grandmothers are women," Susie taunted him.

"Huh?" Dan looked up and then took the message with a grin. "Ouch! Score one for the little girl in the gold helmet. But don't get the idea I'm backtracking. Gram was the exception that proves the rule."

The arrival of a steaming pizza, golden with cheese, heady with its aroma of blended spices, put an end to conversation, at least so far as Susie was concerned. Dan, dallying over coffee, launched into shoptalk.

"Heard Walter filling you up on that old-time glamour routine. If you want a career in radio, better try finding out what it's like today. Where it's going, not where it's been. And the keyword is 'service,' not 'glamour.' We're the fourth R for good, solid bedrock foundation—readin', writin', 'rithmetic, and radio. Television is great. Puts the world in your lap. But you do have to sit still and look. Radio gives you what you want to hear, when and where you want to hear it, whether you're on wheels, wings, or water. Working or playing."

He took a transistor radio out of his pocket and set it on the table, glancing at his watch. "What do you bet every farmer in the valley has the radio on right this minute waiting for the KMID weather report? You feel that wet south wind when we were outside?"

Susie had time only to nod before TKO's voice came on with the last news break before Hip's Teen Time Show, and she could see the people at other tables turning to listen, stopping with forks halfway to mouth, faces brightening as the good news of "rain and warmer" lifted the valley's load of fear.

"Just like putting money in their pockets," Dan said,

slipping the transistor back in his pocket. "Man's best friend," he said proudly.

Susie thought of Maud's remark about everybody rushing for television. "Take a job on TV if you got the chance?" she asked Dan.

His lips quirked downward. "You, too? I thought Cookie had sole copyright on that line. Maybe I'll try television if we get that channel the network is angling for, but I think the FCC will give Waverly the booster tower instead. Pine Hill is the only good place for it, and the KMID transmitter is right smack dab on top, though, and there's the rub."

"I know," Susie said. "TKO said something about taking me up there. I'd like to see the transmitter."

Dan gave another of his snorts. "Don't say that so innocently with your big blue eyes wide open."

Susie blinked.

Dan shook his head. "As if you didn't know there's more woo pitched per square parking yard on Pine Hill than anyplace else in the whole U.S. of A.! I know good old Pete too well to think he's neglected a little lesson like that. After all, he claims you're his special discovery."

Susie blushed and knew Dan would take that as a confession, even though she hadn't heard one word about parking on Pine Hill.

"Good Old Pete," Dan said. "Still the marvel of Middleton High."

Susie didn't answer. She gave full attention to her pie, but every time she looked up, Dan's gray eyes were waiting for her with a teasing twinkle. She finished, and, back in the car, to avoid conversation, she flicked on the radio. Hip Hildebrand's jivy slang came jumping out at her, followed by a familiar long, high wail on a trumpet. The rest of the trio tagged along with much noise and not much music.

"Rock Around the Moon Blues," Susie said. "The way

Hip's been playing it every hour on the hour, I thought it must be Jason's top hit, but it isn't even on the list."

"And never will be, I hope," said Dan.

Susie laughed. "Hip says it will. He says he'll ride it there if it takes all summer."

"He says what?" Dan demanded, his voice icy.

Susie repeated Hip's boast. "It's some local trio. I forget what he called them."

"The Three Beards," Dan said. "They play down at the Beat Niche, Middleton's one and only jive joint."

Susie nodded. "That's it. Hip wants to give them a boost."

Dan snorted. "Hip never gave anybody but himself a free boost. That boy better watch out, or he'll have 'payola' painted all over him in big black letters."

"No," Susie said, "he told me he wasn't getting a cent out of it. He's just doing it to show Walter. Hip boils every time he remembers that Walter said KMID couldn't make a hit song. You know, Hip thinks he's got quite a fan club. Mostly high school girls. They call him all the time."

"Hip, hip, hooray," Dan said sourly.

The tune wailed to a close with a fast break for one soft-spoken last line: "Man, how this cat wants the moon!"

Hip came rushing in to beat the clock with an introduction for the network feature, Million Dollar Music. Tonight's "millionaire" was Bobby Darin, and girlish voices drowned him out with a screaming welcome.

"Women," Dan said. "If they like him, why don't they listen? Never underestimate the goofiness of a woman." He gave Susie a grin before adding, "With the exception of my grandmother, of course."

"And me?" Susie said brashly, and was amazed at herself. Every law in the books ruled that a girl didn't ask a man a question like that. Certainly not on a first date.

Susie brought her thoughts up short. This wasn't a date. Dan was Cookie's property, and he'd taken her to dinner at Cookie's request, to keep a promise. To make sure Dan knew she understood, she added with exaggerated flipness, "How about me?"

"I'll answer that when Cookie finishes making you over," Dan returned drily. "Don't kid yourself she'll let you off with just a new hairdo. That girl saw *My Fair Lady* ten times too often, and she thinks she can do a Henry Higgins on any man, woman, or child who crosses her path. Me included!"

Susie's eyebrows went up at the tone that went with those last words. What remake job had Cookie tried on him to cause a tone like that? she wondered.

The Casa Electrica sign and the side-street archway entrance were before them now, and Susie pointed them out. She got from the car the moment it stopped. "Thanks loads," she said. "See you Monday."

She turned to slam the car door shut and caught the look of surprise on Dan's face. She stood in the darkness watching the car turn and whirl away. Had he expected her to ask him in?

"'Never under-estimate the goofiness of a woman,'" Susie quoted to herself. Why would Dan want to stay a moment longer than absolutely necessary when Cookie was waiting for him? Waiting with shadowy lamplight, dreamy music on the hi-fi. Probably they'd dance. She could almost see how it would be—Dan's arms closing around her, his magic voice humming in harmony the way he did sometimes at the mike.

She shook her head and suddenly saw Pete's broad shoulders move against the light in his upstairs bachelor quarters. He'd been standing there watching her. Now why would Pete—

An echo of Dan's words gave her an answer. "*Pete claims you're his special discovery.*" Was Pete watching

to see who brought her home? To see if there was a good-night kiss? Well, if that was the way he felt, why didn't he say so? After all, he had made that "bachelor forever" and "no honorable intentions" declaration.

"Now," Susie asked herself as she opened the front door, "where do we go from here?"

Chapter 4

SUSIE took advantage of a lull on the KMID switchboard to get out her budget book and have another try at subtracting outgo from income. There were three weekly paychecks on the credit side, but three weeks of noon-hour shopping sprees under Cookie's extravagant direction balanced the credit with debits and left a very small remainder for the new clothes the rapidly warming weather demanded.

If only she had waited. The French blue knit, the cherry red suit, and the black wool sheath were all irresistibly adorable, but they wouldn't do for May's warmth. Cookie was right—the new helmet hairdo did demand new clothes—but she could have got by with just one new outfit, not three. "Charge them," Cookie had said airily on the way to the Fashion Fair, where she broadcasted a monthly style show with a special mobile-unit hookup called a "remote" in radio jargon. The monthly "easy-plan" payments had seemed remote, too, at the time, but now they loomed up in the budget book like red disaster warnings. And Cookie was after Susie to compound the disaster with the purchase of contact lenses, reminding her that "you don't scare the menses when you wear contact lenses."

Perhaps TKO wasn't scared by Susie's glasses, but he hadn't asked her for any dates. And Pete still clung to his bachelor safety line, acting more like a big brother than

a jealous lover. Susie's parents appeared content to have him filling Bob's place, and they seemed to accept the brotherly status without question of Susie's feelings. And not for the world would she let either Pete or her parents know that she wasn't perfectly satisfied.

"But I'm not," Susie admitted. "Everybody's got romance but me." Cookie had Dan. Liz—apparently—had TKO. Even homely Fran Braley seemed to be wrapping Hip Hildebrand around her little finger. Hip was taking Fran to lunch several times a week—and they no longer asked Susie to make a third. When Fran got to drooling about Hip, Susie could always come back with a line about her "Good Old Pete." She had picked up the nickname from Dan that night when he had teased her about parking on Pine Hill, and it seemed too pat to ignore. Good Old Pete was good for a weekly movie date, for mooching free meals, and that was about all. And for making her mother and father happy, of course.

Susie put the budget book aside with a sigh for herself and for the unsuccessful arithmetic and turned to answer an incoming call.

"Hi, honey," Bill Kelly's salesman's voice came bubbling through. "Give me the Grim Gray Maud, will you?"

Susie glanced at the sign-out board before she spoke. "Maud's out. She had to go to the doctor's again after lunch, so she'll be late."

"Ouch!" Bill said—for the blow it gave his own plans, not Maud's need for the doctor. Susie could almost hear his brains shifting gear.

"Look, Susie," he started in again with a rush, "this is the way it shapes up. I can get City Oil to buy a fine fat slice of air time if we can just prove people listen to KMID. They'll try a few sample spots and then go for the big order if they get response."

"So?" Susie prompted him when he stopped for breath.

"So, I'll give you the sales dope now, and you give it to Maud the minute she gets back. Tell her to make it

fancy. And long. She can squeeze in a few extra words easy. You know how something for nothing always helps sell the goods. And I need the dough, Susie. You know."

"I know Maud puts a hundred and fifty words in a minute spot, no more, no less," Susie replied. "No free time, no favorites."

"Aw, Susie. She likes you. You ask her for me, and I'll say you're an angel for sure."

"Don't wait to hear the flutter of my wings," Susie came back, but she rolled a piece of paper into the typewriter and told Bill to start dictating.

"That's all," Bill said finally. "Except clip the City Oil ad out of today's paper and give that to Maud, too. It's got all the figures. Tell Maud to gimmick 'em up for a real smooth soft sell."

"Soft sell," "hard sell," "gimmick," Susie thought as she hung up. They'd been just words when she'd studied advertising at Western, but in these last few weeks at KMID she'd seen Maud put them to work in cleverly angled copy lines that really got response.

Susie's pencil had been doodling almost of its own accord, and now she stared down at the humped lines. "Looks like an Eskimo igloo," she decided, and sketched in a fur-clad figure with harpoon in hand. Suddenly everything clicked into action. She whipped a fresh piece of paper into the machine and began pounding with flying fingers:

An Eskimo has to go out in the cold and catch a whale before he can get oil to warm his icy igloo, but all you have to do is phone City Oil. No, we don't mean City Oil will bring the whale to your door, but we do mean that City Oil serves you with high-grade heating oil, sunshine pure. . . .

She added facts culled from Bill's notes and the newspaper ad, rewriting, crossing out, writing again. Auto-

matic fill up, metered receipts, budget terms. Phone number and address several times, and at the end an urgent "Call *now!*"

She could almost hear how Dan would say it in that low-pitched, melodious voice that always came out of the mike with so much sincerity.

"Hey," Dixie interrupted her, the purple curls at a questioning tilt. "Want to take the mail around now? I know it's early, but Vance and Walter are in secret conclave, and when they come out of it, I'll be swamped. You know Vance." Dixie grinned in conspiracy. "Liz is with 'em."

"O.K.," Susie said. "Give this to Maud with Bill Kelly's prayers. Special handling. Pile it on. Prime time billing. Because—"

"Because Bill needs the dough," Dixie finished, making a face. "Bill's wife's going to have a baby. My foot, what these hucksters won't try to make one li'l old sale. Don't worry—Vance'll put the pressure on Maud. Bill's uncle is KMID's star account."

Susie nodded, glad to be relieved of the burden of pressuring Maud, even in someone else's behalf. Maud not only was honest to the penny, but she had learned her rules in the days when writing overtime spots was punished by a deduction on the writer's own pay check. Now, when time was never all sold out, such stricture was unnecessary, but Maud stuck to the rules. Give one advertiser something for nothing, and you'd have to do it for all, she said, and in her short time at KMID Susie had become convinced that Maud was always right.

"She is also anything but young," Susie thought as she hurried on her rounds. And old people retired. Perhaps someday there would be a chance that the name on the continuity room desk would be Susan Elaine Gryphon. Perhaps—a hundred years from now. Maud was the indestructible type. So was Cookie. Dreaming about either job was reaching for the moon.

Susie whirled down the row of desks in dj alley, saving Dan's letters for last. He was at the mike now in Studio A. She could see him through the glass panels talking away with a half-smile on his face, one hand on the turntable beside him holding back a record. At the right moment he gave it a whirl that sent it spinning, and the red warning light over the door blinked out in confirmation that the studio mike was cut out and only the music was hitting the airwaves.

"Special delivery," Susie said, swinging through the door, footsteps silenced by thick carpet. Before she learned about that red warning light she had slinked in and out of the studio afraid to make a sound, but now she knew that as long as the red light over the control board was out, it was safe to talk. Dan had the studio speaker cut out, too, and only the whirling turntable showed that KMID was still on the air. He had started to reach for the interstudio phone, but at her words he swung round in his easy chair, a look of dismay on his angular face. "Hey, doll! Get back to your switchboard where you're supposed to be. I just called a contest. First person to name Ye Olde Melody Man's mystery tune gets a free ticket to Midway Drive-In. Know the answer?"

He flicked a switch, and the music came booming in.

"Sweet Sue'l"

"That's you. Scoot before that switchboard's bombarded."

Susie scooted, and in a moment was grabbing the headset from Dixie with the warning word "Contest!" Then the board broke out as if hit by a plague of lightning-bugs and bumble bees, and Susie wagged her head proudly at this proof of Dan's listeners. She took down the name and address of the winner and phoned Dan to call off the onslaught, then turned up the monitor speaker beside her desk to check that he was giving the name correctly. He followed up congratulations with a

song and then a trumpet fanfare for Cookie's afternoon show.

"The one—the only—Cookie Carson!" He sounded as if he meant every superlative, although it was common office knowledge that he and Cookie were no longer a pair. He had finally rebelled against her needling him to get into television—as she herself yearned to do.

But Cookie's voice now, as she spoke over the air, gave no indication of that. It was at its usual effervescence, giving dates and locations of bake sales, style shows, rummage sales, along with bargains at the supermarket, special "quick tricks" for late-afternoon shoppers. The show had been Cookie's own idea, and supermarket sales were proving that she knew what women wanted. It was amazing how many women waited to shop until the last minute, relying on precooked, ready-fixed, or frozen foods to get dinner on the table on time. "Who wants to stand over a hot stove?" Cookie had demanded on the air. "You don't—I don't."

Susie heard Dan come back for his familiar farewell buildup before returning to his own show. Susie looked at the clock. Cookie had run overtime. Now Dan would have to scramble to get everything in before Cool Cal Cooper looped his lariat for western songs from the Bar-None Ranch, timed to hit the after-school snack set, just as TKO's sports cast was timed to hit the home-going office traffic. There's always a reason for a radio time slot. Service. As Dan said, what they want to hear, when they want to hear it. And Walter, Scott, Dan—everybody at KMID—pored over the rating lists and listener polls, trying to make sure they were getting the audience they aimed for.

Susie looked up to see Cookie coming toward her in a new outfit of spring green and bronze that effectively accented the redhead's fair skin. Susie pursed her lips for an appropriate comment.

"Shh!" Cookie warned. "I don't want anyone to know I'm skipping out early." She looked over her shoulder to verify privacy and then leaned forward. "WAV is looking for a TV weather gal, and I've got to get over there for an interview. I've just got to. Cover up for me if I get any calls, will you? Walt still has everybody tied up in conference, so nobody'll miss me."

"Wow!" Susie exclaimed. "TV weather gal. Do you really know how to forecast?"

"I know enough to come in out of the rain," Cookie flipped back with a wink. "Wish me luck, pet."

"Luck," Susie said, holding up crossed fingers, and then felt a moment's panic as she saw Cookie swish out, leaving her name peg still marking an untruthful In. It was all right to wish her luck, but how honorable was it to cover up, even with the "not at her desk right now" evasion? Susie went back over everything Cookie had said and what she herself had answered. She hadn't answered! Cookie had taken her cooperation for granted. So Susie was in the clear, after all. But she hoped no one would ask where Cookie was. And she hoped for the redhead's prompt return.

Cool Cal had finished his sign-off amid a *clip-clop* of horses' hooves in the Bar-None Corral—really half coconut shells clomped against a sounding board, Susie knew, for she had watched Scott and Dan cutting the record in the rehearsal studio just a few days ago. Now TKO came on with his referee's whistle and sound-track cheering squad. Still no Cookie. Then the elevator doors clanged, and Susie let out a sigh of relief.

"Touch me," Cookie offered in delirious whisper. "I've got a full-scale sponsor audition booked for Friday at noon! And—"

She broke off as the *clack* of Liz Langdon's heels and a babble of voices warned that an audience was approaching. She looked at Susie, copper eyebrows arched.

"No calls," Susie said. "Nobody knows." But she saw Liz Langdon's sweeping survey of the new green outfit, the jubilant telltale smirk on Cookie's face, and guessed that the blond would suspect that Cookie had been out, even if she didn't know where. Susie kept her own face averted.

"Psst!" came a hiss behind her.

Susie jumped.

"What's on your guilty conscience?" Dan demanded, but didn't wait for an answer. "Want to go down to the Beat Niche with me tonight?" he asked. Susie's heart galloped to a mad flutter and then subsided as the dj made a full explanation. "I want to talk to the Three Beards—see if I can't find out whether there's any payola or if Hip's in the clear. It'll smell up the whole station if Hip's caught, so I've got to know. And I want you along to back me up if I have to go to Walter."

Susie nodded. She was proud of Dan's confidence in her, and glad to be doing something for the good of the station, but she couldn't help wishing it were a real date, not just a business deal.

"Swell," Dan said. "Phone your mother and tell her I'll get you back in time for plenty of beauty sleep. We'll have dinner at the Country Kitchen first. Wouldn't trust the Niche's menu any further than a cup of coffee. O.K.?"

"O.K.," Susie said, and before she could say more, Scott Darnell came whipping out of his office with a "There you are, Danny Boy. Cookie's ready. Let's get cutting on those promo spots." He put a hand on Dan's shoulder, almost pushing him along to the rehearsal studio, and Susie caught enough of his rapid-fire talk to know that the promotion spots were more of the baby-talk bits Dan played with Cookie. Cookie would be the baby, asking why everyone listened to KMID, and Dan would come in with a hearty father's voice that made him sound at least fifty.

The station had used Cookie's baby-talk voice for both

studio promotion and commercials so often that Susie thought everyone must be tired of it. They could try a cute Mr. and Mrs. skit. Newlyweds, perhaps. Susie's fertile brain picked up the idea and gave it a whirl. Call them Honey and Bunny—and Honey would be the bride asking her husband about buying things she'd heard advertised on KMID. A department store would make a perfect sponsor. Or a supermarket, especially if the conversation took place at the dinner table. No, the breakfast table. That would be cozier. Dan could use his own voice for Bunny—warm and sincere and alive. And—

Voices—not Dan's—were reaching for Susie's attention, converging on her in babbling confusion, with Walter Perry's coming through in stentorian authority. He was holding out a familiar piece of copy paper. "Did you write this, Susie?" Behind him the faces of Maud, Vance Saunders, and Bill Kelly all repeated the question.

Susie looked down at the yellow sheet, and the words swam up at her. "An Eskimo has to go out and catch a whale . . ."

The spot she had doodled out for City Oil! Susie blushed through an explanation that ended with a stammer: "I-I-I thought I'd thrown it in the wastebasket."

"Good job you didn't," Walter Perry boomed. "City Oil got a bang out of it. Best listener response they've had for weeks."

Susie's blue eyes fluttered wide. "Listener response! You mean it went on the air?"

Maud reached out bony fingers and showed Susie's handwriting on the note: *Must Copy*.

"Of course it went on the air," Maud said crisply. "I know how to follow orders, I hope." She pointed to one of the red mail stickers that were Vance Saunders' exclusive not-to-be-contradicted memo. *Special Handling*.

Susie tried to explain the mistake. "I don't know how it happened," she began and then clasped both hands to

her mouth. She did know. Dixie had come in to give her the early break for mail delivery, and Dan had sent her scooting back to the switchboard to take the incoming horde of contest calls that were too fast and furious for Dixie's unaccustomed fingers. She'd noticed that the City Oil copy was gone, that Maud was pounding the typewriter like crazy, and she hadn't even thought about her Eskimo.

They all seemed satisfied. After all, if the sponsor was pleased, everyone was in the clear, regardless of transgression. The others drifted off, but Maud and Walter lingered, eying each other, and Susie saw the manager's white eyebrows go up in a questioning arc. "Well, Maud, seems as if you're right—as usual," he said.

Maud gave a thin chuckle. "We'll see. Shall I talk to her, or will you?"

The manager threw up his hands. "Anything I can do, you can do better," he said genially. "It's all yours. Want to start now? I think Dixie can take the board, can't she, Susie?"

"Dixie?" The conversation had been too ambiguous for Susie to follow.

Maud held up a hand to stop proceedings. "Tomorrow's soon enough. Will you bring your lunch tomorrow, Susie? Then we can talk it over in my office while we eat?"

"Why—why—of course," Susie stammered, and Maud nodded curtly, and marched off with usual ramrod back.

"Susie," Walter said, pulling up a chair for conference, "Maud needs your help. She's going to have an operation. A small tumor. Not cancerous, we hope, but you never know. She'll have to be away two or three weeks—won't even be here in town. Unfortunately Middleton hospital isn't as well equipped as it ought to be."

"Yes, I know," Susie said. The hospital was on a par with the dingy railroad station. Pete had told her about a fund-raising campaign that failed because Jasper Ja-

son's mother wouldn't give a penny unless it was named for her dead husband, and others wouldn't give a penny if it was.

"This is Maud's idea," Walter went on. "She wants to train you to take her place while she's gone. She thinks you've got talent, and this proves it." He tapped the Eskimo copy. "We can get temporary help on the switchboard a lot easier than we can in continuity. Maud'll do everything she can ahead of time. We'll all help. Think you can handle it?"

"I'd like to try," Susie said, trying to keep the elation out of her voice, and remembering Maud's puzzling words, a puzzle no longer: "The way to get 'in' radio is to *be* there."

"Well, here I am," she thought, and aloud said, "I'd like very much to try. With Maud to teach me, how can I miss?"

Chapter 5

SUSIE took a surveying glance. The Beat Niche lived up to its name. It was hole-in-the-wall size, and if half its customers weren't "beat," they were certainly giving a good imitation. The other half were frankly there to stare. Since no one seemed to mind, Susie followed suit.

The walls were cracked plaster covered with unframed canvases and water colors, all liberally splashed with paint and garish even in the dim candlelight. A huge brass coffee espresso urn claimed the center table, and other tables and chairs were staggered about in haphazard disorder. Nothing matched anything else in color or style. The paintings might or might not be serious art, but the hodgepodge of furniture was a deliberate thumb-to-nose for tearoom decor.

The Three Beards wandered in without fanfare—one tall, one fat, one pipe-stem thin—each with a set of wispy whiskers making a struggle to live up to their title. Dan sent them a request for "Rock Around the Moon Blues," along with an offer to buy a round of drinks, and sat back to straight-face through the results. The trumpet wailed, and the voices came along in a whine:

Man—I've got those space, space, space rocket blues.

*Like those when-are-we-gonna-reach-the-moon
blues.*

Like when am I gonna get the good news?

There was another wail of trumpet, and the fat man came in with a spoken aside: "Man, you got it all!"

Somewhere down the tables there was a titter, and the trio whammed into the next verse.

I know my baby loves me, man, my baby's no square.

But how's she gonna tell me with all her folks in our hair?

Father, mother, sister, brother, sittin' right there.

If only I could get her all alone on the moon,

Rock up in a rocket with a voom and a zoom.

Like wow in a rocket all alone on the moon.

The fat voice came in again with a hopeless complaint: "Man, how this cat wants the moon!"

There was no applause, and after a few moments the trio came drifting back to offer Dan their nonchalant thanks.

"Cat, you dig that?" the tall one said.

"Hear it a lot on KMID," Dan came back heartily.

Susie almost choked on her coffee, and began fussing with the candle that was dripping pink wax over the broken bottle stem on their table. Dan was using the hearty-heavy father's voice that went with Cookie's baby talk, giving a perfect-square-from-Squaresville rendition.

The answers were anything but "square." Even after having listened to Hip, Susie couldn't understand every word, but she did catch enough to know that they had not paid Hip for his efforts.

"No bread," the tall one said. "He don't shake us for a crumb."

The thin one gave Dan a look and supplied a translation. "No geets, man. No M. No green."

"Man," the tall one approved with a bobbing wag of scraggly beard, "that's good lookin' out!"

The third beard gave a waggle of contradiction. "Man, like those dj's don't need none o' our bread," he reminded them in a peevish drawl. "They got it made. Ain't you read how those bigtime dj's draw down fifty, sixty thous a year? Now that's good lookin' out!"

They went drifting off at a loose-limbed slouch, and Dan turned to Susie with a shrug. "And that's how rumors get born. Think we ought to tell 'em Hip doesn't cut his bread off the bigtime loaf? Walter pays what the union wage scale says he must and that's about all." Dan heaved a sigh as if he'd thrown off a troublesome burden. "Well, I guess that winds up our private-eye detail for tonight. Hip seems to be in the clear, thank the Lord. The FCC would never give us a TV channel if we got any payola dirt on our tail."

Susie started. "I thought you didn't want to be in television?"

"Other people do," Dan said. "Walter Perry, for one. And if Walter's got a channel to play with, maybe he'll let me handle the radio end. I've got big ideas about what a radio station can do for a town like this. Shed the network, for one thing. An independent station can block out its own program, give the town what it wants, when it wants it. All the time. Service with a song—"

He broke off, suddenly aware of Susie's empty cup. "Why didn't you tell me to get off the soap box and order more coffee?" He started to signal the indifferent waiter lounging near the urn, but Susie stopped him.

"No more, thanks. How about coming home with me for some? Dad'll have the coffee pot on, and when he says coffee, he means coffee—not glue. Besides, I promised Mom I'd bring you home. She wants to see her favorite Melody Man in person."

"Hey," Dan said, pleased, "you mean I've got an audience out there in radioland?"

"You certainly have, if my mother's any sample."

"Good deal," Dan said. "Let's go."

He took the long way home. "To blow the beat out of our hair," he explained. "Get us back on the square."

Susie, teasing him about his heavy-hearted voice, yielded to sudden temptation to try out her Aunt Ri skit.

Dan chortled, thumped the steering wheel for applause, and dragged the whole story out of her—half-sparrow, half-dormouse, the Gryphon nose and heritage. Consequently it was later than either one of them realized when he finally nosed the car through the Casa Electrica archway.

"Too late for that coffee?" he asked.

Susie pulled down her glasses and let Aunt Ri answer. "Young man, when a Gryphon gives her word, you can rely on it."

Dan chuckled. "O.K., Miss Half-Lion, Half-Eagle. Lead the way."

Susie didn't have to worry that her parents would pull any "built-in boy friend" remarks with Dan. To them he wasn't a date; he was a radio personality; and they treated him that way, beaming with pleasure when he turned the conversation to Susie and her new assignment.

"She's earned it," Dan said. "Everybody's been pushing off odd jobs on her ever since the first day, and she's taken it without complaint. But this continuity deal isn't an odd job; it's a real chance to show she's got what it takes."

"It's only till Maud gets back," Susie reminded them, and herself, too. Going back to the switchboard wouldn't be easy.

There was a thumping on the front door, and Pete thrust in a shaggy head.

"How about letting me join the celebration," he began, and then stopped with an obviously false air of surprise. "Why, Dan ol' Hamster—you here? Long time no see."

"Hi," Dan said, not getting up to yield his place beside

Susie on the sofa, in spite of the invitation of Pete's half-outstretched hand. Pete followed through on his own behalf, crossing to the sofa and perching on the arm at Susie's right, giving her shoulder a proprietary squeeze.

"Congratulations," he said. "Your mother told me the good news. Do we call you 'chief' now?"

"I'll get you some cake and coffee," Susie said, jumping up.

"How about it?" Pete went on, looking at Mr. Gryphon. "Pretty proud of our girl, aren't we?"

Susie saw Dan's eyebrows go up.

"Tell you what," Pete said. "When Middleton gets that TV channel, you can star on your own show."

Susie laughed. "Oh, Pete! You're a dreamer." But she couldn't help feeling pleased at his enthusiasm, even if it was impossibly fantastic. "I'd never make it on television," she said. "Not with glasses. They catch the light and make you look frog-eyed."

"Get contact lenses," Pete told her airily.

"What?" Dan said, giving Susie a look. "Those glasses make her look like a pixie. Don't do it, Susie. They're your trademark. Everybody's got eyes, but only Susan Elaine Gryphon frames 'em in blue exclamation points."

Susie didn't know what to say, but Pete saved her the trouble. "Any more of that cake of yours?" he asked with one-of-the-family assurance. "It's almost as good as your apple pie, Susie."

"Why, thank you, sir," Susie said, dropping him a curtsy. She had been hoping Dan would ask if she had baked the cake herself, but he hadn't.

"Ought to taste our Susie's apple pie with hot-buttered-rum sauce. Wow!" Pete was giving Dan the full treatment.

Evidently Dan was not impressed, and when Susie returned, he was at the door, taking leave rather stiffly. Susie shut the door behind him with a bewildering feeling that somehow everything had gone all wrong.

Pete gave her a judicious tip-to-toe survey. "You're too wound up to sleep. How about taking a little ride to relax? I've got the jalop out in front."

Susie hesitated.

"Go along," her father urged, with a promptness that made Susie suspect he had known about it beforehand. "Do you good."

Even her mother agreed. "It isn't so very late, dear."

Susie went for her coat, then followed Pete to the car, thinking that he, not she, was the one who was all wound up. Even Dan hadn't been so full of compliments. He'd been too preoccupied with worrying about Hip and pay-ola.

"Nice guy, Dan," Pete said, as if he had read her thoughts. "Never get anywhere, but a nice guy."

Before she could offer contradiction, Pete changed the subject, calling her attention to the fragrance of the fruit orchards with a long-drawn intake of the sweet-scented night air. "M-m-m! Won't be long till cherry-picking time. Bet you bake a mean cherry pie, Susie-girl." He reached over, pulling her against him. "Relax. Take it easy."

Susie was too drowsily comfortable to resist. Instead of being wound up as Pete had said, she actually felt let down, and the night air, the motor's low purr and steady speed were all making her sleepy. Suddenly she sat upright. Pete had pulled off the road and stopped. Susie caught a glimpse of steel towers, a red beacon light. The KMID transmitter!

"Pine Hill!" she exclaimed in surprised recognition.

Pete's voice went to a growl. "Been here before?"

"No!" Susie disclaimed, remembering Dan's report of Pine Hill's reputation.

He pulled her around to face him, his forehead almost touching hers, the steering wheel behind her allowing no retreat. "Old school rule," he told her in a husky whisper. "First guy who takes you to Pine Hill gets a kiss."

He claimed the forfeit, his lips on hers softly demanding, and released her with a triumphant "M-m!"

An unexpected tremor of response went racing through Susie's bones, leaving her helpless to move or speak. Then she remembered Pete's words—"no honorable intentions." Were they a defense against rejection, as she had thought at first, or the truth? And just what had he meant by telling Dan that she was his own special discovery? She was too mixed up to try to find the answers tonight.

"Take me home, Pete," she said. "Please."

He laughed. "That's right. Your parents are waiting for a good little boy to bring a good little girl home early, aren't they?" He laughed again. "I can wait."

Susie slipped from his arms, and he slid the car into gear and started down the slope.

In the next few days Susie found herself wondering time and again which was the real Pete? The brotherly, good-natured guy who helped her with the dishes, teased and flattered his way into her parents' hearts? Or the man with the demanding lips she had found on Pine Hill? Which was camouflage and which was real?

And why had she responded to those lips with such emotion? Had it been just the time and the place? A natural overflow of the day's excitement? Or was she falling in love with Pete Ansel?

Pete had said, "I can wait." And he was proving it. He was keeping to the one-of-the-family, make-himself-at-home status, with only a blue-eyed glance now and then telling Susie that he had not forgotten Pine Hill.

Pete was smart, Susie acknowledged, whatever game he was playing. She was too busy, too tired after hectic days of trying to learn everything Maud was trying to teach her, to take on any more problems. The strain of her own double-duty assignment was heightened by the rumor that the FCC was going to grant KMID its television charter. Dixie bobbed about from desk to desk,

spreading the news, the guesses, the worries. If television came in, would radio go out? Who would get the TV nod, if radio was finished, and who would get the axe? If Middleton didn't get a channel, Waverly would get the booster tower, which would bring clear reception to the whole valley, command all the fat advertising accounts, and force KMID off the air.

It was like wars and rumors of wars, Susie thought. Everyone had the jitters. If only Walter would just speak out and tell them where they stood. Anything was better than the uncertainty.

When the word got around that Maud was quitting to take a continuity job in Chicago, Walter Perry called an all-staff meeting to set things straight. At least that was what the white-haired manager announced he was doing. He did convince everyone that Maud was going to a hospital in Chicago, not a radio station, but he couldn't tell them what the FCC was going to do. He didn't know himself.

"Stand by," he appealed with a half-helpless gesture. "You're my family, and I won't let you down."

Susie looked across at Cookie, without meaning to point any finger of shame, and was surprised to catch the redhead in a hang-dog-blush. She had not yet said one word to Walter about leaving, since she still wasn't sure she'd get the TV weathergirl post. There had been complications, she had explained vaguely—sponsor problems. Meanwhile, a bird in the hand . . .

Bill Kelly wasn't so complacent. He quit to grab at an insurance job before someone else got it. Good jobs weren't easy to find in Middleton, he explained to Susie as if he felt the need to justify departure. Vance Saunders began interviewing replacements, and a string of hopefuls came past the reception desk, but they were either dissatisfied with what KMID had to offer or else did not measure up to the caliber Vance demanded. Susie, up to her ears in work in this last week before tak-

ing over Maud's desk, had scant time to listent to Dixie's reports and veiled predictions.

Susie stopped to stretch her aching fingers, letting them fall limp in the old "rag-doll" reprieve from tension she had learned back in grade school, closing her eyes for a moment's rest from strain.

"Hey, chick!" It was Hip's voice, snapping her back to attention. He was flapping a Jason hit list under her nose, jabbing a stubby finger at the number three title, jig-gling, jumping, snapping his fingers.

"Got those space, space, space rocket blues," he chirruped. "Like wow! Number Three spot, baby. Told you I'd make it." He was doing a heel-and-toe shuffle around her desk, tootling an imaginary horn. "Grab an axe," he invited her, trying to pull her to her feet. "Join the band, chick."

"Hip, no! Stop! Look out, you're breaking the headset!"

Her cry of protest brought Dixie, Scott, and Nikko on the run. Even Cal came loping out of the music library, a record under his arm. Oley Olson was right behind him.

Hip, satisfied with his audience, let Susie go and began snapping his fingers under other noses. "Thought I couldn't do it, hey?" he demanded belligerently. "Pussy-foot Perry said KMID couldn't make a hit if I played it every hour on the hour. Like he's a fig, man. A moldy fig from Figsville. Li'l ol' Hip showed him. Like wow!"

Hip whirled around to confront Dan, released from the control board by a fifteen-minute newscast with no local sponsor breaks. Dan took the list Hip waved at him.

"How'd you work this?" he asked, his voice a low-pitched knife. "There's not another station in the valley giving that thing a ride."

"Wanna bet, man?" Hip challenged. He pulled a bright red transistor radio out of his pocket and waved it at Dan.

Susie started to protest. It wasn't a fair test now. When the Jason list came out, every station within listening gave the top ten a whirl. Hip's cocky bragging drowned her out. "Ten minutes," he claimed. "Somebody'll be playing it in ten minutes or I'm a space monkey's air tank."

"You're tanked, all right," Dan conceded, but Hip was too busy twisting the dial to enter verbal combat.

The minutes ticked by on the clock above Susie's head. She watched, counting, hoping Dan would be right, knowing he couldn't be.

He lost. Right on the red second hand's upsweep to six the wailing trumpet came moaning in and the three voices took up their whining cry.

Dan turned on his heel and went back to the studio while Hip swung off on an ear-splitting tour, thrusting the radio and waving the hit list at everyone right and left.

"Hip! Come here!"

It was Walter Perry's voice cutting across the din, and Susie heard the office door shut with an ominous thud as the capering dj followed the manager inside. Then a heavy stillness descended on the hallway.

No one knew what Walter Perry said to Hip behind that closed door, but when the dj came out again, he swaggered sulkily back to his desk in dj alley. By the time Susie made the afternoon mail rounds he had fortified himself behind the rehearsal turntable in the music library and was listening to his evening's selection of records, bobbing his head, hunching shoulders, snapping fingers with aplomb, completely ignoring anyone who poked a curious head around the corner, his phone off the hook, unanswerved.

The paperboy came with his usual cheery greeting, and Susie took time out to glance at the headlines. Suddenly the blue eyes behind the blue frames blinked wide, and she reached for the line to Studio A.

"Dan," she said breathlessly. "I can't leave the board, but there's something in the paper I think Walter ought to see. Can you get away?"

Dan didn't question her. "One minute," he said, and Susie knew he meant exactly that. In sixty seconds the clop-clop coconut shells would be announcing Cool Cal Cooper over the air, and Dan would be through for the day. Susie didn't even ask herself why she had called Dan. Dixie—even Liz—would have taken the paper to Walter. No need to explain urgency once they saw that black headline.

Payola.

And a string of black question marks. The lines below asked outright how a tune nobody played got on the hit list—nobody but KMID, the station that just happened to be sponsored by Jason's Music Store. "Just happened?" the paper asked bluntly. "This calls for investigation."

Dan read it tight-lipped.

"Thanks, Susie. Don't worry. Walter and I can handle it." He marched back to the manager's office, and once more Susie heard the door shut.

The board beside her buzzed an in-coming call. Susie jumped, then forced herself to answer calmly.

"Susie!" Fran Braley's voice came in choking hysteria. "Oh, Susie, I don't know how to tell you."

"You don't have to. I've seen the paper." She meant to be reassuring, but Fran's voice came back in a panicky quaver.

"Oh, Susie, I'm in trouble! I've tried to get Hip, but he won't even talk to me."

For a moment Susie was too shocked to understand how Fran could have got involved in something like this, but then she remembered the homely girl's shrugging acceptance of loneliness. Hip's whirlwind attention had caught her off balance. Susie shuddered, remembering her own quick response to Pete that night on Pine Hill. She wasn't in love with Pete. She knew that now. But in

the business of romance, a girl could easily make a mistake.

"Oh, Fran," she said, sympathy welling up.

"Look, Susie, I know it's Hip. It has to be. There wasn't anyone else around. Please make him call me. Tell him I'd shown Mr. Jason the hit list before lunch so he knows 'Rock Around the Moon' wasn't really on it."

"'Rock Around the Moon'?" Susie repeated inanely.

"Of course. What did you think I meant?" Fran sounded impatient. "I was typing the stencil when Hip came to take me to lunch. He was there reading it while I got ready, and when I came back, I gave it to one of the girls to run off. She swears she didn't change a line, and I know she didn't. Hip did. He must have done it for a joke, but Mr. Jason says I did it for him, and he fired me."

"Fired you?" Susie said. Somehow she could do nothing but repeat Fran's words.

"You know Mr. Jason," Fran said grimly. "I'm sure Hip put 'The Rock' in just for a joke, thinking I'd notice it and change it back. We're always joking about it being 'our song.' So if he'll just come down and tell Mr. Jason, maybe he'll take me back. You will ask Hip, won't you, Susie?"

"Leave it to me," Susie promised grimly. "When Walter Perry gets through with Hip this time, he'll wish he never even heard of the moon."

"Oh, Susie, no," Fran wailed. "Don't make him lose his job, too. He'll never speak to me again."

"You'd be lucky," Susie said, making no promises, and hung up. Before she could reach for a line, Dan came charging down the hall, a worried eye on the sign-out board.

"Isn't Cookie back yet?" he demanded. "I got so tied up with Walter, I almost forgot. She and I have that Epco spot of yours to do."

Susie gulped. Cookie was not only out, she was at the

Waverly TV station auditioning with TKO as partner. Somehow the fast-talking sportscaster had convinced her that a partner was all she needed to sell the sponsor, and naturally he had nominated himself as the perfect choice.

"We were supposed to cut a recording," Dan said, "but there isn't time now. We'll have to do it live today, cut the take tomorrow." He looked around as if expecting the redhead to materialize.

Susie took a deep breath and knew that loyalty to Cookie didn't stand a chance beside KMID's call. The show had to go on; the sponsor had to get what he paid for. And when the sponsor was Epco, the sale made with her own father's name as local dealer—

"Cookie isn't here," she said, each word a separate battle. "She—she's at WAV for a final audition."

Dan let her tell just enough more to get the picture. He looked at Susie, eyes narrowed. "You do baby talk?" he shot out.

Susie knew what he meant. She'd written the Epco spot in the baby-daddy pattern especially to please Cookie. Dan was asking her to take Cookie's place!

Susie shook her head. No use even saying she'd try. Her tones were too deep and full for baby talk.

Dan grimaced, then snapped his fingers. "We'll rewrite it. You do that sour-apple auntie voice. Same idea. Get Dixie to take the board and hurry. We've just got ten minutes for the woodshed." He started to go, then turned back to translate. "Ten minutes for rehearsal."

Susie nodded, jabbed in the call for Dixie, and hurried to follow Dan.

"Don't play it straight, ham it," Dan told her, handing her the copy, on which he had already written in some substitutions.

If it had been anything but Epco copy, Susie might have fluffed, but she had heard Epco sales lines morning, noon, and night all her life, and she could call up slogan

and by-line at a moment's notice. Moreover, it was her own copy she was revising, and she'd sweated over it too hard not to be familiar with every line, right down to the commas and periods.

"Good enough," Dan said. "It's a take." He looked through the glass panel between the rehearsal room and Studio A, signaling Cal Cooper that they were ready to go on the air. With an answering jerk of his head Cal motioned to the clock and then to the side table with the two-way microphone Cookie always used.

"Come on," Dan said. "Don't worry about a beef from AFTRA. Nothing in the union rules against interviewing somebody who uses the product. And if you're not an Epco user, I've never seen one. Besides, you'll be saving Cookie's bacon."

"Shouldn't we tell Walter?" Susie asked.

"After what Hip did? I bearded that lion for you once today, girl, and no more. Later—when he's cooled down."

He shoved her into the studio ahead of him, motioned her to the waiting chair, got another for himself, then turned, waiting for Cal's pointing finger to signal air time.

"Electric Products Company has news for you," was Dan's fan-fare, and gave Susie a finger-point signal.

"Young man," she came back with perfect Aunt Ri tartness, "what makes you think you can tell me anything about EPCO? I've used Epco electronic products since I was knee high to a humble bee, and I tell you—"

"All right, Auntie Ri," Dan chuckled. "You tell me."

Susie almost forgot her lines. At rehearsal Dan had called her "Auntie," and now his addition of the name "Ri" took her by complete surprise. If Aunt Ri heard—

"Well, tell me," Dan ad libbed, and Susie swung back into stride.

As they were nearing the finish, Dan kept one eye on the clock. Cal did, too, and his long finger tapping his

nose above an applauding grin told Susie that they were winding it up right on schedule.

Cal read his own Epco endorsement in cowboy twang, following the yellow copy sheet taken from the big black book, and then cued in a rollicking western.

"Whew," Susie breathed when the control-board light winked out. She felt limp all over.

"Keep this under your hat, Cal," Dan said. "You, too, Susie. If Cookie gets by without a scalping from Walter, she'll owe you one big fat vote of thanks."

"How about you?" Susie said. She wanted to hug Dan for giving her this chance, but she knew he had done it to save Cookie.

"What Cookie owes me is an explanation," Dan growled. "And you can tell her so."

Susie went back to the board, dreading Dixie's prying questions, but for once the purple-haired southerner was so full of gossip about Hip that she took it for granted that Susie had been only rewriting the Epco copy with Dan, not reading it on the air. She hadn't even heard the spot. Instead of listening to KMID as usual, Dixie and everyone else, apparently, had a transistor in desk or pocket for a surreptitious check on "Rock Around the Moon's" popularity. No one in the studio had even heard Aunt Ri's voice, and Cal's initials on the official log would only verify that an Epco spot had been read as per schedule. To keep herself honest, Susie knew that she would have to file a copy of the revised script in the Epco folder in the continuity room, but by the time Maud came back there'd be small chance that she'd look through the bulging folders to see what had been read or when. The telltale piece would have to stay in the files two years to satisfy Federal Trade Commission requirements, and then it could go in the wastebasket.

Two years, Susie thought with a groan. It was a long time to live with a secret, even when it wasn't a guilty one. Then she remembered that Dan would tell Walter

long before then, and the groan changed to a sigh of reprieve.

She had forgotten that her parents might be listening, and Pete, too, and that night their hilarious hail of greeting set her heart to pounding.

"Sure knew you wrote that Epco stuff today," her father told her. "Say, Cookie had Ri's voice down to a T, didn't she? I bet you were coaching her."

"Aunt Ri'd have your hide if she knew," Pete said, grinning. "You're darn lucky she's too far away to listen."

"I'm luckier than that," Susie acknowledged. She felt guilty for not giving them the whole story, but she had promised Dan not to tell anyone. Letting the tale leak out and get back to Walter Perry with some malicious twist would only make things worse. Her parents wouldn't talk, but she wasn't sure she could count on Pete. Unless she was very much mistaken, he had a grudge against Dan Tucker. He'd given Dan some pretty black looks the other night, for some unaccountable reason.

"Wait till you hear about the stunt Hip pulled," she told them, and wound up the story with Walter's last-minute announcement. Hip was fired; TKO would take over the Teen Time. With state baseball championship playoffs coming up, the high-school crowd would be eager for sports news, and with TKO at the mike, they'd get an adult audience, too. Walter had looked smugly pleased at his solution.

Susie did not add that his smugness would get a rude jolt if TKO and Cookie got their TV spot. So far, it was still up in the air, and Cookie, full of apologies for her tardiness, had pressed Susie to continued secrecy. But at least she didn't have to keep it secret that she'd persuaded Walter to hire Fran Braley to run the switchboard while Maud was in the hospital. It gave her a pleasantly warm feeling to know she had been able to repay Fran's friendliness with something more than

words. The brown-eyed girl's kindness that horrible day at Jason's was something she'd never forget. Perhaps when the two or three weeks were over, Jasper Jason would be cooled down enough to give Fran back her job. At least she'd have time to look for a new one, and to get from KMID the good reference Jason refused to give.

"I just had to talk Walter into hiring Fran," Susie said, explaining, and felt the pleasant warmth again as her mother nodded approval.

"That's my good girl," Mrs. Gryphon said.

Pete seconded it. "That's our Susie!"

He tried to catch her eye, but she turned away. Just whose Susie she was—or wanted to be—was something she couldn't put into words.

Chapter 6

SATURDAY! Susie thought with half-awake drowsy content, and gave the alarm clock a smug so-much-for-you look as she turned over and settled down to go back to sleep. The phone rang in her mother's room, and Mrs. Gryphon was answering.

Not for me, Susie thought, relaxing again.

But it was.

"Susie," her mother called. "Pete wants to know if you'd like to ride out to Fruitvale with him. He has to go on business, and it's such a nice day."

Her mother sounded persuasive. And since sleep was gone now, Susie decided she might as well get up. "Give me fifteen minutes," she called, and laughed as she heard her mother make it a half-hour.

Susie was ready on the dot, and Pete headed the car for the valley farms. "Take you out and show you how the other half lives," he told her. "Picker Town is starting its annual population explosion, and there are Mexicans all over the place." He wagged his head with a gesture he had copied from her father. "Want to make sure they cash their pay checks at Casa Electrica. Those Mexicans sure go for transistors, so we're making 'em a payday special. See the posters?" He jerked his head toward the back seat, and Susie reached around to look.

"Why, they're in Spanish!" she exclaimed. "Let's see if I can remember enough to translate."

She stumbled over a word or two but finished with a flourish. "Say, that's a good idea, using Spanish."

"Thank you, ma'am," Pete said. "You know, they're nice people, these Mexicans. Crying shame the way some stores shove 'em around."

"But why do they?" Susie asked.

Pete shrugged. "You answer that, and you'll know what makes the world go round." He chuckled sardonically. "And that's not love—no matter what Perry Como says."

Susie didn't answer. She was wondering if any stores in town would want to angle for the Mexican trade with radio spots in Spanish. The Spanish teacher from the high school might do the announcing, but one of the Mexicans themselves would be even better—

"Hey!" Pete cut in. "Thought you weren't even going to mention KMID till Monday morning."

"Well—" Susie began, and then whirled at Pete with blue eyes blinking wide. "How did you know I was thinking about KMID? I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to! I read you like a book, Susie-Q. And you were cooking up a little scheme to go on the air in Spanish. Right or wrong?"

"Right," Susie admitted. "But how did you guess?"

"Didn't guess. I knew. Sure as two plus two. When a gal's got the radio bug biting the way you do, there's only one answer."

"But it is a good idea," Susie protested. "After all, if you want to sell them, you ought to talk their language."

"If you want to sell them," he repeated with meaningful emphasis. "Don't get your hopes up. Like sometimes this town thinks it's an island. But just in case your boss goes for the idea, I'll scout around and see if I can find somebody on this end to help."

There was no more to be done till she'd talked with Walter and Vance, so Susie let the matter drop, turning her attention to a study of Picker Town. The row of cottages looked bleakly unwelcoming, but the black-

eyed Mexican women with babies clinging to their skirts were jabbering away, laughing, waving, apparently in good spirits. They were all busy at something. Washing clothes at the row of open-air laundry tubs, filling buckets at the pump, scrubbing protesting toddlers with heavy-handed despatch, giving them a spank and a hug before sending them off to play. Or to work if they were old enough. Those who were too small to climb the cherry trees were just right for the strawberry patch.

Susie didn't need explanation, and she didn't think these older children were being abused. They were out in the good sun and air, and surely every penny would be needed to help the family make even a halfway decent living. It couldn't be more than halfway. Not when they were always on the move from one ripening crop to another. Remembering her own fears at leaving Chicago, Susie thought she could understand at least a little of their nomad world.

"Poor things," she said.

"Not so poor," Pete reassured her. "Maybe they like living this way. It's a big adventure. And the farm cooperative gives them a good deal. They've got a school set up on the other side of town, so the kids get a few hours at the books every day. Take 'em down and bring 'em back to work in shifts, so we get our way and they get theirs. Eat their cake and have it, too."

A very thin slice of cake, Susie thought, eying the shabby cottages, the hodgepodge row of secondhand cars and trailers that in a few weeks would move on, with "home" only a faraway place that might or might not be found again.

"Say—old Miguel's back," Pete said. "Listen."

There was the strumming of a guitar up ahead, and Susie followed Pete's lead to a sunny spot where an old blind man sat soaking up the springtime warmth as he played. There was a contented smile on his face, as if he were seeing the tropical homeland valleys he sang about.

Just beyond him was the check stand where the filled baskets were tallied, and as the pickers turned back to their tasks they gave the old man a cheering word or called for a favorite tune.

"Miguel comes every year," Pete said. "You stay here and listen while I go see about putting up these posters."

Pete was right, Susie discovered on Monday. Neither Vance nor Walter thought enough merchants would be angling for the pickers' trade to make Spanish broadcasts worthwhile. But since TKO's doubling on the Teen Time show gave him an overlong assignment, Walter did concede that they might substitute a fifteen-minute segment of Mexican music with Dan as emcee to give the sportscaster a needed break.

"Could we have interviews?" Susie asked. "You know, get some of the workers up here and have them tell where they've been, where they're going? A lot of them speak English. And there's a wonderful old guitar player named Miguel—"

Walter threw up his hands to stop the outpour. "Work it out with Dan," he said to her. "It's your baby." He started to walk away and then turned back, his underlip in a sideways slant of sudden acceptance. "Tell Nikko to log it in as educational," he ordered. "It'll look good when the FCC goes over the program."

Susie nodded. Maud had explained that educational and public service features were important considerations each time the station license came up for renewal, and they would play a part in securing a television channel, too. Walter still hadn't given up hope, evidently.

Susie could hardly wait for the first interview day. She had been so busy with all the crowded duties at the continuity desk that Dan had taken over the job of choosing the ones to be interviewed, but he had enthusiastically seconded her suggestion that old Miguel would be one of the first.

Two were enough for a start, Dan had decided, and for Miguel's partner he had chosen a handsome young man of eighteen or twenty. "If he's as fast with the bright remarks on the air as he is with the girls in the cherry tree," Dan chuckled, "this young Pedro will steal the show."

Cal Cooper gave him a knowing leer. "Better hire me as censor. A Mexican joke can sting like chili peppers."

But Dan wasn't worried. "I know a few words of Spanish myself. One of 'em's *adios*. If the pepper begins to bite, I'll say good-by but fast."

Susie hurried through her work. An early start had given her enough free time to stand by in the studio and catch the show at first hand.

"That's it, Pedro," Dan was saying as she came in. "Just talk right into the mike. I'll ask the questions, and you answer. *Comprende? Si?*"

"Oh, yes, *senor*," Pedro agreed, but Susie thought he was giving the microphone a very doubtful glance.

"Everybody quiet now," Dan warned. "Not a word as long as that red light's on." He let a few bars of "South of the Border" make a musical introduction, spoke a few explanatory words over the hushed music, then brought the music up to a rolling close.

"And now here to greet you from the KMID studios is Mr. South of the Border in person, Pedro Morales. I know you're here to pick cherries in Middleton, Pedro, but tell everybody what you do back in old Mexico."

Dan nodded, pointed to the microphone.

Pedro gulped, swallowed, stared, mesmerized, at the red signal light over the control board, then at the mike.

"Ai," he gulped. "Ai-e." The sweat broke out on his forehead, his nose and cheeks. Susie touched his elbow to give him encouragement, but he did not make the slightest murmur of response.

Mike-fright, Susie thought. He's frozen stiff with fear.

Dan knew it, too. His fingernail made a quick scratch

across the control-board microphone to fake a static cut-out. "That's Pedro Morales," he announced. "As you just heard, he works on a big ranch down in Mexico. This is the way he'd say it to music."

The record Dan had been snagging out of the pile beside him was on the turntable just in time and the face-saving substitute rolled out its musical answer:

*Alla en el rancho grande,
Alla donde vivia—*

Dan carried it through, followed with more records, and then gave Miguel his turn. The old guitarist was not troubled by a microphone he couldn't see, and he let the music roll out with the same happy smile and twinkling fingers that Susie had watched back in Picker Town.

Finally it was time for the network newscast that gave Dan his break, and the dj whirled around in his swivel chair to catch Pedro's mortified eye with a reassuring smile.

"So, what's mike-fright, *amigo*? Everybody gets it sooner or later. Like the measles."

"*Dios mio!*" Pedro whispered, wiping his brow. "Who would think that little metal thing could strike one dead like lightning? I swear, *senor*, I could not have said one word if mother's soul had demanded it." He clapped hand to forehead in a seizure of realization. "*Ai de me, senor*, how the *senoritas* will laugh at me!"

"No, they won't," Dan said, and explained his finger-scratch trick that had pretended to cover up Pedro's answer with static.

"*Ai, senor, mil gracias!*" And Pedro sprang up to clutch Dan in an embrace of gratitude.

"No strain," Dan said. "The girls do enough laughing at us without a man deliberately giving them an excuse." He looked at the clock and caught Susie's eye. Time to clear the studio, she realized, and began leading old Mi-

guel to the door, reaching for Pedro with her other hand.

Dan waved him along. "It's O.K., *amigo*. She's one *senorita* who can keep a secret."

Susie was too busy piloting the blind Miguel to do more than smile, and later there wasn't time to go back and thank Dan for his compliment. Walter Perry was waiting for her in his office, Fran said, wiggling her eyebrows in a meaningful signal that the manager was not waiting to bestow any medals.

"No more interviews, Susie," he told her brusquely. "Those Mexicans aren't to be trusted. Never know what they'll say or do. Dan pulled your chestnuts off the fire this time, but maybe next time he can't."

Susie had no choice but to accept the decision. Dan's trick might fool the public but it certainly hadn't got by an old professional like Walter Perry.

"Used that trick a few times myself," he told her now, and grinned to show he harbored no ill-will. "Dan's a good man. I've got my eye on him for big things if we get that television channel. Glad to see you two working so well together, Susie. KMID teamwork. That's the way."

"Yes, sir," Susie said, and hoped she'd got out of his office before her telltale blush made him suspect that it was not just KMID teamwork that made her get along with Dan Tucker.

It was just as well that the interviews had been canceled, for Susie was far too busy with the day's routine chores to tackle any extra assignments. If only Maud were close enough for conference, a little advice now and then, the work would be much easier. Maud was doing much better, had come through the operation with fears of cancer allayed, at least for the time being, but she was not yet strong enough to come back to Middleton's small understaffed hospital. Susie shook a figurative fist at Jasper Jason. Pete said Jason could afford to give the hospital building fund a boost big enough to put it well underway, if he weren't so selfish. Fran, who seemed

to stand up for her old boss in spite of his mistreatment, assured Susie that it was Jasper Jason's mother who held the family purse strings. Jasper, even at forty, was doled out an allowance, and could not touch the principal of his inheritance until his mother's death.

The desk phone rang, and Susie swung to answer it in a business-like copy of Maud Harrow's clipped voice. "Continuity desk."

"Susie," Pete said, his voice raw with excitement, "I'm out in Fruitvale. Listen. There's been a terrible accident. The schoolbus with the Mexican kids got rammed by a runaway freight truck. It wasn't the truck's fault. Brakes went out on the hill. But there's bleeding kids all over the place, and we've got to get 'em to the hospital fast. Sheriff says put it on the air. Tell everybody to stay off the Fruitvale Highway and Broad Street till we get them all taken care of."

"Will do," Susie said, and dashed for the studio. No need to ask Walter's permission to broadcast a sheriff's request. This was the sort of public service every radio station pledged to give in time of need, the sort of service that radio could give faster, oftener than television could ever do. She'd tell Dan first and then come back to type out a bulletin to post for repeat use. What else could she do? What would be needed? Blood for transfusions. There wouldn't be enough on hand at the little hospital for this kind of emergency.

"They'll get the bloodmobile from Waverly," Dan said and cut in with the emergency highway ban as Susie dashed back to her desk.

"Get me the hospital, quick," she told Fran. Even in the midst of emergency there would be someone to answer the phone and tell her if she should broadcast an appeal for blood donors, say when and where those donors should report. Her phone was on its shoulder cradle leaving her fingers free to type down the directions as fast as they came over the wire.

She took time then to put her heart in the words and when the message was finished she went hurrying in to Dan. He was broadcasting the weather report, so she entered on tiptoe, the door shutting silently behind her on its safety hinge, the thick carpet deadening her step. Dan took it, let the turntable spin out the record he had been holding in readiness while he gave the sheet a quick scan.

"Here's an emergency bulletin," he said, cutting back. "You can save a child's life. Go now to the Red Cross bloodmobile and give your blood to help a child live. The Red Cross bloodmobile will be right outside the Middleton hospital kitchen entrance. Go and give your blood that a child may live."

That was not all Susie had written, but Dan's deep-pitched voice broke in with his own suggestions that Susie had not thought of in her haste to get the word on the air. "Don't block traffic," Dan warned. "Keep your cars away from the front emergency entrance. These are Mexican children," Dan came back to Susie's wording, "but won't you remember—"

He was maneuvering a new record onto the turntable as he spoke and Susie suddenly realized that he had thrown in his own suggestions to give himself time to get this record in place—something he was choosing with special purpose.

"Won't you remember that they're God's children, too?" Dan asked softly. There was a low hum of voices, gathering momentum, lifting, soaring, and then a young Negro girl's voice rang out assurance:

"He's got the whole world in his hands—"

Tears came to Susie's eyes, and without conscious awareness of movement her hand reached out for Dan's clasp. His fingers curled over it. There were no words to say, and his hand tightened again in farewell pressure before he released it and returned to duty, one eye on the relentlessly moving hands of the clock, one on the

log. Somehow, Susie knew, he would manage to work in a repeat appeal as often as he could do so and still meet their logged obligation to sponsor and network. She didn't have to ask Dan for special handling. He'd give it of his own generous accord.

Belatedly, Susie realized that the manager might expect to be consulted about such a heavy dosage of public-service items. A sheriff's request for traffic regulation went on as a matter of course, but an appeal that had been of her own suggesting might not rate such privilege. Especially since it was for the Mexicans.

"If he doesn't like it, I'll—I'll quit," Susie said to herself as she marched straight for the manager's office. But even as she said it she knew that she would never leave KMID of her own free will—not in Maud's absence, at any rate. These few days at the continuity desk had caught her up in an ever growing stream of assurance that this was the work she wanted most.

She paused at Liz's desk to check on Walter's availability, and the blonde waved her in without question.

"Oh, just asking for you," Walter said as she entered, but Susie rushed into her defiant story without waiting for explanation.

"Good work!" the manager said when she was finished. Susie could hardly believe her ears.

"Good work. You did the right thing, Susie, and I'm proud of you. Maud will be, too. Public service is part of the continuity job, and when emergencies come up, there isn't always time to wait for permission. Use your head—that's what it's for." He stood up, signaling dismissal and Susie turned to go.

"By the way," Walter said, "you'll be glad to know that I'm on the way to the bloodmobile right now. Oley and Liz and a couple others who got your message are going, too. Don't suppose you can take the time to go now? Tomorrow's book ready?"

Tomorrow's book! Susie gave the manager a dismayed

look. She had been so wrought up with today's need that she had forgotten the big black book that would regulate tomorrow's air pattern.

"No," she admitted, "but it will be. I'll get Dad to take me to the bloodmobile later."

He nodded, and Susie went back to her desk, collapsing in her chair with a long-drawn breath for renewed energy. She hadn't yet learned Maud's imperviousness to everything except the task in hand or gained Dan's ability to swing from emotional peak back to business-as-usual practicality.

She sat up, opened the file drawer at the right, book at the left, Nikko's precisely typed log in front, and reached for her red checking pencil. Maud had said that a place for everything and everything in its place was the file drawer's secret success formula, and even at this early date Susie was ready to swear that this was true.

There was another success secret—plenty of carbons, so that there was a separate piece of copy for each time an announcement was read on the air. Beware that last-minute scramble through the dj's discard box to find a piece for re-use. A little extra bother in the beginning saved a lot of extra time in the end. And read everything twice for accuracy. Maud had horrible tales to tell of miscopied prices that had advertised sheets at twenty cents instead of two dollars. And that close-out special on ten boxes of paper at seventy-nine cents instead of a correct seventy-nine cents each. Store owners tore their hair and canceled accounts for mistakes like that, and when they did, the poor continuity writer was likely to bite the dust.

Susie shuddered as she remembered the day she'd left out a price completely. Cal Cooper had caught it and come roaring into her office, asking how on earth she could make a mistake like that.

"Because I'm human, I guess," Susie had answered meekly. Luckily Cal had laughed and gone back to the

board with both price and good temper in proper place. Next time she might not get off so easy. The checking—and the filing, too—were drudgery. You couldn't expect to like them, but you endured them for the sake of the more exciting tasks.

Susie marked "Cookie" in big red letters across the next piece of copy. Usually Cookie wrote her own, but this time the sponsor had asked that all his announcements be the same, word for word. That happened more often than Cookie's prima donna temperament liked to admit, but a sponsor request was something she had to accept.

Susie shut the book with a sigh of relief and carried it into the studio, where it would be at hand when Wacky Williams arrived to start his Wake-Up Show. Having to come up with cheerful chatter at six every morning was not her idea of a happy assignment, but Wacky liked his early-bird hours. He had so much trouble sleeping himself, he said, that it was downright satisfying to wake everybody else up.

Cal Cooper was at the mike, and Susie entered on tip-toe. "Get plenty of Puff's Potato Chips," Cal was saying. "Don't forget the big week end ahead." Susie let the book drop into the bin with a bang that hit the airwaves full force, then turned and ran, not even seeing Cal's black look. The big week end ahead was Memorial Day, and she was already fifteen minutes overdue for a date with Dan to work on sound effects for the special traffic safety promotion. The state traffic safety commission had urged full cooperation, offering an award for the best safety publicity, and she was determined to win. Not just for herself. Not even for KMID. Bob's death on the highway had made traffic safety her own special crusade, and this was a chance to make hundreds of people listen.

She rushed back to dj alley, but Dan was gone, the room empty. Susie looked at her watch. No wonder. It

was way past quitting time. Even Fran would have left the switchboard.

Take-'Em-Up Tony had called it a day, too, and the elevator was on automatic. Susie pushed the button and leaned against the paneled side, nearer the exhaustion point than she had realized. Dan's disappearance after he had promised to stay and help on the traffic spot had added the final damper. Of course, she tried to excuse him, he'd put in quite a day already—

"Hey!" Dan's voice hailed as she swept out the doors and down the street. His long legs were disentangling themselves from under the steering wheel with hasty scramble. "I looked in your office twice, and you had your nose buried in the file drawer. We'll do that traffic deal tomorrow, O.K.?"

"O.K.," Susie agreed, feeling unaccountably light-headed.

"Get in," Dan said. "I was waiting to take you to the bloodmobile, but the way you look, I'm not sure you have any red corpuscles to spare."

"I certainly have!" Susie told him. "If you think—"

Dan gave her a gentle shove and shut the door. "I gave up thinking where women are concerned years ago."

Susie laughed. "You're a fraud, Dan Tucker. You make out you're such a cynic—and you're nothing but an old softie. Don't forget I saw your face when you talked about those Mexican kids today. And when you chose that little Negro girl's spiritual—that was perfect, Dan."

"It did the job," Dan said, but Susie was not deceived.

"That record gave me an idea," she said, sparing him the embarrassment of further praise. "Can you take off that wonderful shivery first humming chord for our traffic spot—add some harp music and anything else you can think of to set the scene for heaven?"

"Sure," Dan said. "I think so. Then what?"

"Then the devil comes in—that'll be you. You give out

with one of those lowdown devil laughs and ask St. Peter if he's trying out some new harps."

"Who?"

"St. Peter. You'll take his part, too. And you'll say something like, 'no, devil, no—I'm just getting ready for all the people who'll be coming up here after the holiday week end traffic rush.'"

Dan threw back his head and laughed. "Susie! How ghoulish can you get?"

"Well," Susie defended herself, "people don't listen when you just say drive carefully. You've got to shock them. I'm serious, Dan. Please don't laugh. You know how my brother Bob was killed. If I can prevent just one highway death this week end—just one—it will be for him. Please don't think I'm silly—"

"I don't," Dan said. "I think you're wonderful. And I think your skit is wonderful, too. Let me think." He was tapping his fingers against the wheel and Susie waited.

"O.K.," he said. "We'll start with that chord crescendo, bring in the harps, the devil and St. Peter bit, then—wham! Skidding tires, a big crash. Maybe screams. We've got some spine-tinglers in the sound-effects library. Scare you spitless."

Susie was pounding on his knee. "That's it! That's it! And then the devil will yell, 'Holiday week end? Traffic jam? St. Pete, I gotta go stoke up my fires!' And exit laughing."

Dan's own laugh was an approving shout. "Susie, Susie! You're the greatest. I don't know what music I'll find to cap that exit line, but I promise you something good. If you don't get the award for this, I'm a bum guesser."

"We'll get it," Susie said, putting the emphasis where it belonged. . . .

The nurse at the bloodmobile would never have believed that a few moments before those sparkling blue eyes had been listless, the cheeks pale.

Chapter 7

NOTHING, Susie thought, could be too difficult to tackle today. Not when she could look up and see the Traffic Safety Award plaque hanging over the continuity desk. Not when she could read "KMID" written there and tell herself again that the state traffic toll of highway deaths had been the lowest of any holiday week end in years.

What's more, the cleverness of the harps-to-hellfire scene had brought complimentary mention in several editorial columns, and at least one other station had already asked for a copy of the recording to use on its own program over the Fourth of July. Susie's phrasing of "holiday week end"—rather than Memorial Day—made re-use possible without changing a word.

"To quote the Beards of the Beat Niche," Dan had told her, "that's 'good lookin' out.'"

"Like way out!" Susie had assented. Without either of them planning it, the slangy argot of jivedom had become a sort of private language to use when they were alone. Somehow the ridiculous patter could say what you really felt without the danger of sounding sentimental, Susie decided. Dan was so unassuming that one word of praise could send him back into his shell, the very turtle of modesty.

Susie looked up again at the plaque and bobbed her head in satisfaction. The gold helmet of her hair swayed

in accompanying rhythm and then settled smoothly back in place.

"Looks pretty good, hey?" Dan's voice came in a low chuckle from the doorway.

Susie gave him a caught-in-the-act pout. "Oh, Dan! Don't make fun of me. I am pleased. Pleased as punch, and I don't care who knows it. I just wish you could have one over your desk, too. It wouldn't have been anything without the sound effects and that wonderful mean devil laugh of yours."

"Give the devil his due, they say."

"You mean as your grandmother would say," Susie teased him. With Nikko in the next office and Fran within listening range at the switchboard, she did not want to use any of the jive phrases she might have tried if no one else could overhear.

"As my grandmother would say," Dan amended, "you have my number." He gave a nod back up at the safety award. "One's enough. Like maybe I can use a good excuse to hang around."

A short, hard "Hahl" brought them both swinging around to the opposite door. Cookie, her face pale, lips tight, stood surveying them sardonically. "Well," she said, her voice stretched out brittle thin. "Well, what do you know, I've been given the double-cross. The run-around. If you want a knife in your back, always look for a guy who owes you a favor."

She was looking straight at Susie, ignoring Dan as if he didn't exist.

"What—what do you mean?" Susie asked in a very small voice. Not because she wanted Cookie to answer. Those were just the only words her tongue seemed able to say.

Cookie shrugged, drew off her white gloves finger by finger with maddening deliberation. "TKO got the weather job. With another partner. *I'm* out. Who took him down there? I did. Who told the sponsor he ought

to have a man-and-gal team? I did. And who's the gal TKO tells 'em he has to have on his team or else?" She left the question hanging.

"Who?" Susie asked obediently, gratefully. She was sorry for Cookie, but the answer she had expected was so much worse than this news of Cookie's.

"His *wife!*" Cookie dropped the word as if it were a bomb.

Susie's lips opened, closed, opened again, her voice a far-carrying cry of sheer amazement. "His wife? TKO is married?"

Cookie's white gloves flipped back and forth in her hand, signal flags of contradiction for the cold don't-care mask that was her face.

"To—to Liz?" Susie said.

Cookie's copper head gave brief denial, and she stood like a star taking a curtain call, waiting for the audience to quiet before she spoke.

And she had her audience, Susie acknowledged. Fran, holding headset in hand with strained forward pose, like a curious cow on the end of a tether. Nikko. Dixie. And Liz Langdon, not a single gilt hair out of place, even though she must have fairly flown down the long hall to get here this quickly.

"Guess who?" Cookie said. "Guess who plays Juliet to our Romeo?"

Juliet, Susie thought. Romeo? Once before someone—Fran—had said something about the Capulet-Montague feud between the Jasons of Middleton and a Waverly family. And wasn't TKO related to the Jasons on his mother's side?

Dixie, her brown eyes snapping beneath the purple curls, had all the answers. "Juliet?" she demanded. "You don't mean TKO married a Kirk? Jean Kirk?"

At Cookie's nod the purple-haired chatterbox nearly exploded. "Jean Kirk? Jean Kirk? Why, her father won't even set foot in Middleton!"

Cookie's gloves gave an expressive flip. "That's the point. That's why they've kept it secret. Jean thought she could make TKO live in Waverly and when he wouldn't, she went back home to Papa. Now that TKO's the TV weatherman, he can change his mind without hurting his face, but little Jeanie wouldn't take him back unless he lets her take the TV bows right beside him."

The gloves did a complete circle. "I can't imagine why she'd be jealous of me—but she is. So here's Cookie right back at the old stand."

For a moment no one seemed to have anything to say.

Then Dan reminded Cookie encouragingly, "The old stand's not such a bad place to be."

Cookie turned on him, green eyes scathing. "Not for a stick-in-the-mud like you, maybe! You don't care about getting anywhere. I do!"

She flung herself past him, past all of them. Hot words of answer were burning Susie's tongue: Dan does care—he just doesn't want to get the same place you do! But the words remained unspoken. Dan would have to answer for himself.

She looked up, and Dan was already following Cookie's hustling figure.

Dixie was dashing away, too. To spread the news, no doubt. The others drifted after her. Susie caught Liz Langdon's wide-eyed stare. There was no gimlet sharpness in those eyes now. Only a hurt that could not be covered quite soon enough. A hurt that reached out for Susie's own blue gaze with mute understanding of sisterhood.

Susie silently acknowledged the kinship and then swung around and began pounding out copy on her typewriter with furious pace. As Dan's grandmother would say— She wiped away the thought with grim determination. She didn't want to think about anything even remotely connected with Dan Tucker ever again.

"Susie," Nikko said softly, her Oriental face carrying

no hint of the scene just past, "we've got problems. You know Walter won't let Terence serve out his two weeks' notice. He'll fire him today, the minute he hears."

It was like pushing a mental button, Susie told herself. One minute she had been just Susie with a heartache, and the next she was the continuity chief with problems. The decision of who would pinch hit for TKO's show was a matter for Scott Darnell, the program director, to handle with Walter's approval, but whatever changes were made, the traffic log and the continuity book had to be changed right along with them. The spots written to tie in with the Oliphant sports-hero approach wouldn't fit anyone else. She'd have to write new ones. Probably Scott would take the sportscast himself today. Perhaps permanently. He had an athletic career behind him as varied as TKO's, although certainly not as glamorous.

Nikko agreed. "And Dan will take the Teen Time tonight, I bet. All that baseball talk of TKO's is falling flat anyhow, with Middleton's team in the cellar."

"Could be," Susie said, but her heart took an involuntary leap of pleasure. Dan would like that. He was always talking about what could be done with Teen Time to make it a great show. Dan wanted to give the whole story of jazz, each program a meaningful chapter to tell about the dance tunes, the blues and ballads that were America's contribution to world music. Work in history along with the songs and the singers who made it, were still making it. Louis Armstrong playing W. C. Handy tunes. Duke Ellington. Jelly Roll Morton. Charles "Bird" Parker. Count Basie. Ella Fitzgerald . . .

Dan could roll out the names and the stories that went with them like a musical tapestry, bright with color and keyed for sound, from Bix Beiderbecke right on down to the little Negro girl who had sung that spiritual he'd played the day the little Mexican children needed help.

From slave-born field cry to the latest bandstand

triumph. And Dan said the teen-agers would like other American music if they had a chance to hear it—things by Aaron Copeland, John Alden Carpenter . . .

A phone jangled out a summons in Scott's office, and Susie turned to Nikko with a knowing look as Scott went down the hall at a long-legged stride to Walter's office.

"There he goes," Nikko said. "We'll get the message any minute now." She went back to her desk to clear for action, and Susie followed suit.

Fifteen minutes later they were exchanging compliments on perfect guesswork. Scott would take the sportscast, Dan the night show.

"TFN" Walter told Susie.

"TF," she repeated in confirmation. Till Further Notice. But she knew neither Scott nor Dan would be in a hurry for that notice to come through. Scott could easily spare time for the sportscast. He'd always collected a good share of TKO's material anyhow, watching for sports items on the long yellow roll of news that came clicking off the wire machine in endless loops, tearing them off, and pegging them on one of the newsroom hooks. There were other hooks for weather, national, international news—any special item that held important interest for the moment. If there was difficulty in network news reception or a local report was needed for any reason, it didn't take long for a dj to make a quick selection.

But choosing material for two music shows—Magic Melodies and Teen Time—would be a terrific strain on Dan. He took the selection of each record so seriously, planned background comments that really built a program instead of just filling in time.

A strain or not, Dan would like the assignment. He'd be back in the music library right now giving tonight's albums a trial spin, a pleased, little-boy look on his angular face.

And Cookie beside him.

Susie's mouth tightened, and she jerked open the file drawer with an almost vicious tug. With all the work she had to do, between now and quitting time, she was entirely too busy even to think of Dan Tucker. Or of the small stillborn hope she had been nursing ever since Cookie had first whispered her own hopes for the weather girl spot. She hadn't even dared put the hope in words, but Walter would have needed someone to step into Cookie's place, just as now he needed someone to replace TKO.

Susie told herself she would not go past the music library on her way back from leaving tomorrow's book in the studio, but she did. Dan was there, bent over the turntable just as she had pictured him, but he was alone.

"Hey," she said, trying to sound bright, "I hear congratulations are in order."

"Thanks." Dan held up one hand, nodding at the whirling record. "Listen."

It was a woman's voice, with a sob and a moan and a laugh in it all at once. "Mahalia Jackson!" Susie whispered.

Dan nodded, pointing to the album cover. *Black, Brown and Beige*. Duke Ellington's orchestra with Mahalia Jackson. She waited for the end of it, and then Dan put it back in its case and added it to the others he'd already chosen.

"Where's Cookie?" Susie couldn't help saying.

"Home. Told Walter the whole story. While she was at it, she made a clean sweep. Including the Aunt Ri switch."

"Oh, no! Is—is Walter angry? What did he say?"

"Nothing that need worry your little head. I was the one who told you to do it. But I don't think he's angry. Maybe he even approved. He sawed off something about loyalties having as many arms as an octopus."

Susie let out a sigh. "I'm glad to get that cleared up before Maud gets back Monday. Golly, I just hated the thought of her finding it out—"

"Monday?" Dan said. "Then you go—back to the switchboard?"

Susie nodded, lips carefully quirked upward, tears at bay. "Sure. This is my last Frantic Friday as continuity chief. That was the deal. Just like Cinderella. You didn't think an operation would keep Maud away from KMID for long, did you?"

"No. Maud's a fixture."

It was the truth, and Susie had known it from the beginning, reminded herself of it every time a leap of joy at work well done had told her that she had found the right niche for herself. Only Cookie's niche could have tempted her to change her mind.

"And so is Cookie," she said now. "Walter likes her."

"He knows a selling voice when he hears one," Dan said defensively, and then his tone changed. "I'm worried about that girl. She's the hara-kiri type."

"Hara-kiri!"

"Don't take it literally. She wouldn't commit suicide, but she could go off her rocker. Cookie has to be on top. *Has* to. Success is her bread, butter, and vitamin pills. I've been her home-canned applause track too long not to know. What she needs is a new gimmick for her show. Something to give her a real boost. Any ideas? This means a lot to KMID, too."

Susie rose to the call like—as Dan's grandmother would say, she told herself—an old firehorse answering the alarm bell. And the moment she spoke she unaccountably wished she hadn't. She just didn't want Cookie and Dan to play the Honey-Bunny newlyweds.

"Well, it's kind of a long story," she temporized. "Just a piece of an idea."

Dan looked at his watch. "I've got kind of a long supper hour before show time. Come on and I'll take you

down to the Grotto, and you can tell me about it while we eat."

There was no graceful way to refuse, and Susie went along with a silent but firm self-lecture on common sense. Why should she object to Dan and Cookie as newlyweds on the air when they'd probably be honeymooning for real before long? Dan couldn't be this concerned unless he really cared about the little temperamental redhead. He couldn't just be feeling sorry for her—nor just thinking of the station's good.

But he didn't seem to think the Honey-Bunny skits would go over with much of a bang. In fact, he almost seemed out-and-out annoyed at the idea.

"Probably can't tell much till you work out the dialogue," he conceded. "I'd have to see what you can do with it."

Susie, her professional pride piqued by his rejection, said icily, "I have two finished ones in my desk if you care to see them."

Much to her surprise, Dan accepted. "Come and sit in while I do the show," he invited. "Oley's there—we'll be chaperoned. We'll look at those scripts on the network news breaks. Which reminds me—I could use your help riding herd on that clickety-clack wire machine. Gives me the jitters."

"You?" Susie said in doubting disbelief. But she went.

Whether Dan actually needed her help or not, she tried to give it, feeling a little tingling itch of hope that some really big story would break and she could come rushing in with it so Dan would get it on the air for a valley scoop. But the typed lines came clicketing off on the yellow roll with repetitious familiarity. And Dan didn't have time to look at her skits after all. "Tomorrow," he told her. "And don't say anything about them to anyone else."

When the last record was on the air, Dan stood up, stretched, and held out his hands. "Shall we dance?"

It was a waltz. Something about a good-night kiss. Just before the last chorus Dan drew her in close, holding her against him without moving.

"He's going to kiss me!" Susie thought, heart leaping up crazily. Once before, long, long ago, it seemed, she had wondered what it would be like to dance in the shadows in Dan Tucker's arms. No shadows now. The studio lights were brightly glaring. But she knew the answer.

Wonderful. Heaven.

But Dan didn't kiss her. He tapped her nose with fingerlight touch. "That's a good girl," he said. "Thanks for helping me."

All the way home Susie tried to remind herself that it simply was not sensible to feel let down because Dan had not kissed her. Dan Tucker, of all people, would not kiss one girl when he was in love with another.

The car came swinging through the archway, and out of the darkness beyond the small porchlight a fire-red circle flamed briefly, wavered upward. A cigarette—

"Why, that's Pete," Susie said, pointing.

"Pete?" Dan's voice was undecipherable.

"That cigarette by the door," Susie explained with matter-of-course inflection. Her father did not smoke. Nor sit on patio doorsteps. Pete did both, though usually he sat on his own steps, not hers.

"Oh, I understand," Dan said, but his voice sounded as if he understood things about herself and Pete that weren't true. Before Susie could explain, Pete loomed up in the headlights.

"Where have you been?" he said to Susie, putting his head in the open window.

Susie bristled. Pete had no right to ask that. She'd found herself bristling at Pete quite often lately. He

might know a lot about electrical hookups, but he certainly got his own signals crossed.

"Get in the house, quick," Pete ordered. "All the Mexicans from Picker Town are on the way to serenade you. The last kid got out of the hospital today, and they're so darn grateful for your blood donor rally, they can't hold it in any longer."

"Oh, Pete!" Susie exclaimed, but it was to Dan she turned to share in excited wonder.

"You sure made a liar out of me," Pete growled. "I told them you never stay out late on Friday 'cause you're too tired. After all, that's what you tell me—"

Dan was giving her a shove, ignoring Pete's tirade. "Scoot, Susie. I'll phone tomorrow to hear all about it."

Pete grabbed her arm. "They're coming! Listen!"

Susie didn't wait for her own ears to verify the warning. With a hasty good night flung over her shoulder at Dan, she was out of the car, across the patio, inside the house, taking the stairs two at a time.

"Susie, hurry," came her mother's voice. "They're gathering under your window."

Her father's chuckle was a cover-up for excitement as high as Susie's own. "No rose in your hair, *senorita*? If you don't throw 'em a rose, how'll they know you like it?"

"They'll know," Susie promised. Somehow she would make them understand, even if there weren't enough words in Spanish or English to really say it. And with the first swell of voices the tears that had been held back all day came pouring down. Susie let them come. It was safe to cry when you were happy. It was only when you hurt that you had to pretend there was no need for tears.

Chapter 8

SUSIE walked in through the wide glass KMID doors on Monday morning determined to get through the dismal hours somehow without letting anyone guess how low she felt. Maud was back on the job, firmly at anchor at the continuity desk. Fran was manning the switchboard, flipping through the morning mail with efficient smoothness. "And me," Susie thought, sliding her peg back to In, "I'm the girl without a country." Just "fit in," Walter had told her. He didn't want to let Fran go till he was sure Maud could handle the work again with her old skill. Continuity was no job for a semi-invalid.

Maud certainly looked healthy, Susie thought. "Welcome home. You look wonderful," she told the gray-haired woman honestly. "Ten years younger."

"Well, I'm ten years busier," Maud came back with her usual crispness, waving at the shambles of the week-end logbooks with pages spilled in haphazard abandon across her desk, just as Wacky Williams had dumped them at five-thirty this morning to clear the studio for action. They all had to be sorted now, the program formats in their plastic jackets put back in the binders, the pages of copy filed sponsor by sponsor in the current-usage or discard drawers.

The continuity desk looked like this every Monday morning, but somehow Maud's derogatory wave seemed to imply that this particular shambles was the direct re-

sult of Susie's inefficiency. Susie took a firm grip on any impulse to self-defense. She had meant to get here early enough to have the desk clear, a summary report of new accounts ready to reel off with Maud Harrow-like preciseness, but Maud had arrived even earlier.

"Well, this is Monday," she tried to explain in spite of her resolution, and saw Maud's gray brows quirk in pointed comment. Susie managed a laugh. "Who am I, trying to tell you? You've waded through a lot more Monday desks than I have. But I'll be glad to help, Maud, really."

"I'm quite capable of doing my own work," Maud said brusquely, and Susie knew it was best not to offer further assistance.

There was an extra desk in Nikko's office she could use, Walter had told her, and Susie went in to claim her squatter's rights. She did have at least one job that was all her own. Perhaps two, if Dan wanted her to work on the Honey-Bun scripts after he gave them a second look. But first she could get going on the sign-off slogans for the network contest that Walter had assigned her. The network was offering a prize to all its affiliated stations for the best series of station promotion breaks, brief slogans that would tell the listeners they were tuned to a top station.

"May I borrow your typewriter awhile, Nikko?" Susie asked.

The dark-haired traffic secretary was already hard at work on the big advance-postings traffic calendar, with three colored pencils clipped between the fingers of her left hand for quick use in marking code letters for accounts that could or could not be shifted to other time slots, that were one-time-only, weekly, or continuous listings. She waved Susie a red-yellow-and-blue spiked permission with her left hand while she mumbled instructions at the green pencil in her right. "Electric Products, TFN," she half whispered like some witch's

magic incantation, and then aloud, "Sure, Susie. Help yourself."

Susie got out the list of sample suggestions the network office had sent and her own scribbled ideas. The network suggestions were the blow-your-own-horn style, boasting that such-and-such was the station with the best music in town, the station with your interests at heart, the friendliest station on the air. When she heard claims like that, she couldn't help thinking of one of Aunt Ri's proverbs: "Self praise, scant glory." It seemed a bit more to the point to make the station break of service—really prove its friendly interest.

This is KMID, 1330 Middleton, she wrote, the station that reminds you to drive with care—because we care about you. The station that wants to play the music you want to hear. This is KMID, 1330, saying please don't be a litterbug—keep America beautiful. Put out your campfires and cigarettes—dead out—keep our forests green.

She worked each one over, making sure it had exactly the right number of words to fit the brief station-break time allotment, and then typed out the list with several extra copies.

"Walter wants these to start right away, Maud," she said. "The new station breaks for the network contest. Shall I just take this copy into the studio now?"

Maud stopped her work at the file drawer with a tight-lipped expression of annoyance at being interrupted, her long fingers whisking the paper from Susie's hand. "Walter wrote these?" she demanded tersely.

Susie shook her head. "Oh, no. I did. The network letter came in while you were gone. You know—"

"Walter has seen them?" Maud cut in coldly. "Approved them?"

"No," Susie said, taken aback by the challenge. Walter had said the contest was her responsibility, but perhaps he took it for granted that she'd get his approval.

Maud was putting the list on the shelf behind her, well out of Susie's reach. "I believe Walter still handles station policy," she said cuttingly. "I'll discuss these with him when I have time."

And that was that.

Susie turned away, biting her lips to keep the angry retort from bursting into words that would hurt her far more than they were likely to hurt the hard-shelled continuity chief. Maud was just back from the hospital, she reminded herself. In spite of her good appearance, she was still not herself and had the convalescent's usual short temper, the doubts and lack of self-confidence. A lack Maud Harrow would fight with fire and brimstone, let the sparks fall where they would. It was good, solid reasoning, but in spite of its solidity Susie did not find much comfort in it to ease her own hurt.

"Susie," Fran's voice called out in an overloud summons, "the mail's ready for you to take around now."

Susie wheeled, snatching up the neatly criss-crossed stacks. "You don't have to shout," she said gruffly.

Fran's homely face puckered to a hurt pout. "Why, Susie, I didn't mean to shout. I just wanted to be sure you heard. And I couldn't call you on the phone because I didn't know which phone you're supposed to answer."

"That's nothing," Susie returned bleakly. "Neither do I. Maybe I'm not supposed to answer any phone at all."

She flounced back to her office, scooped up the Honey-Bun script for Dan. "Not that he'll do anything with it," she told herself disconsolately, and marched off on her rounds, an empty feeling at the core of her stomach.

Dan was not at his desk in dj alley, as she had expected, since a long network newscast gave him a fifteen-minute break from duty right now. She had saved his mail till last on purpose, planning to join him with a cup of coffee from the big pot always kept warm in Oley's workshop around the corner.

Well, she'd just have a cup by herself, Susie decided

forlornly, and reached for the handle. The pot popped up in her grasp, feather light. Empty. Susie's lips tightened. Making coffee was Cookie's responsibility. All the rest of them took turns buying it.

With a sigh Susie headed back toward Studio A. Dan was still at the board. She could see him through the glass panel, and beside his dark head the coppery tint of Cookie's sleek waves. She was perched on the table beside him, talking with bubbly, airy gestures, swinging her legs with a provocative demand for attention.

"And that's the hara-kiri type?" Susie asked herself wrathfully, regretting every ounce of sympathy she had wasted on the mercurial redhead.

"Well, good morning, pet," Cookie bubbled, completely ignoring Susie's glower.

"Good morning," Susie said shortly. "I left your mail on your desk. This is for you, Dan."

If that was a hint for Cookie to leave, she didn't get it. "What's this?" she asked Dan, almost leaning into his lap to flick away the Honey-Bun script. "You been whipping up the creative genius, pet?"

While Susie did a slow burn, the redhead scanned the carefully typed lines, unconsciously posing and posturing as if she were reading them before the microphone, and all of a sudden she broke into a giggle.

"Dan, listen," she commanded with a peremptory wave at the control board.

Obediently he turned down the volume so that the newscaster was muffled to a low murmur just loud enough for Dan's well-trained ears to catch the closing signal that would put KMID back on its own airwaves. Susie wanted to stomp out, but she couldn't. She had to stand there hearing Cookie's bubbling voice reading the lines with a half baby-talk lisp, and with every word one fact stood out clearer and clearer. She had not written those lines for Cookie Carson to read. Not ever. She had told herself they were for Cookie. She had told Dan.

But not one thin shadow of Cookie's personality had got in the script—in the lines or between them. It was her own voice she had heard reading those lines. Hers and Dan's—together.

Cookie was still bubbling. "Oh, Dan, I can't do it alone. Here, try it with me."

"No," Dan said.

Cookie twisted a topknot strand of dark hair into a teasing spiral. "Come on, Danny Boy!" Then she turned to Susie. "This is good, pet. Let me take this with me. Call it my farewell gift."

"No," Susie said in the same cut-off tone Dan had used, and then suddenly she realized what else Cookie had said. "Farewell gift?" she repeated.

Instead of answering, Cookie was giving them both an up-and-down green-eyed survey. "Well, what do you know!" she exclaimed, jumping down from her post, flinging the pages back into Dan's lap, brushing one hand against the other with a that's-all sweep.

"Yes," she said. "Wish me luck, pet. I've just been telling Dan the big news. I'm going to be Waverly's weather-gal after all. TKO's little Juliet finds she's about to become a mother and can't face the TV camera's all-seeing eye. So hurray for me."

She leaned past Susie and snagged the bronze "Cookie Carson" sign from beside the mike. "Hurrray for you, too," she said, plopping the metal rectangle in Susie's astonished hands. "You're the new Cookie Carson of KMID. With my blessing. Walter'll tell you as soon as he works up a formal presentation speech. Have a happy."

She went out, hips swinging, and the heavy studio door closed behind her with a muted sigh of air.

Susie swallowed. Only a moment before she had been too angry for words, too hurt. Now she was too excited. She, Susan Elaine Gryphon, an air personality, one vital part of the voice of KMID! Her big chance—and all because the way to get "in" radio was *be* there.

She looked down at Dan. He was marking up the Honey-Bun script with large black scribbles.

"You won't need that," he said, reaching up for the metal name plate, and with a brisk whirl of the swivel chair he swung around and plopped the sign into the wastebasket. "Exit Cookie, enter—" The gray eyes reached for Susie's blue ones with seeking question. "How's about trying it this way?" he asked, and the low voice had a ring of melody in it that even Susie had not heard there before. He handed her the script, and now she saw that instead of Honey and Bunny he had written in *Dan Tucker and— And—*

"Susie Tucker," she read, her voice a half-breath whisper.

He took the script from her and enfolded both her small hands in his big one. "Mrs. Dan Tucker," he corrected her. "For real. For ever. On the air and off. Twenty-four hours a day."

There was faraway music in Susie's heart now that was not coming from any microphone.

Dan stood up, drawing her close. "I love you so very much, Susie. Will you marry me?"

Suddenly the corner of his eye—or some inner watchdog alarm—caught the sweeping red second hand on the clock just as the muffled voice on the monitor said, "And that's the news."

Then nothing. Not a sound. Dan whirled about-face, pulling Susie with him into the swivel chair as he grabbed for the switch with one hand, the turntable with the other, fighting to get the record on the air to fill that deadly void of silence.

He didn't quite make it.

Into the silence Susie's voice rang clear. "Yes," she said, "Oh, Dan, yes!"

Dan's voice went rolling over hers into the microphone with sweeping triumph. "This is KMID, the happiest

station in the universe," he told the listening world. With one joyous sweep he sent the record spinning into action, and the red signal light winked out knowingly. Susie felt two arms around her, two lips on hers, and then a glowing heaven of oneness.

Here's Susie



Changes at KMID: television threatened her very existence and KMID's air jockey was treading the same old disc jockey's path...

Changes were a problem for Susie, too. Young Pete Ansel had slipped her off to an opening at KMID. A switchboard operator wasn't exactly the kind of job Susie had in mind, but she didn't hesitate. This was an entrée into the glamorous world of radio.

Virginia Holmgren's delightful story of the personalities that make up a small radio station—and of the earnest and attractive young girl who becomes an important part of that station.